THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JULY 1992
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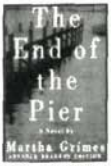

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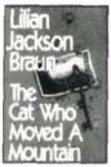

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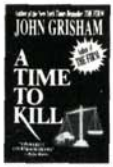

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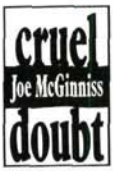

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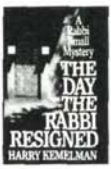

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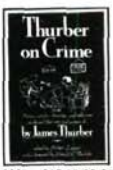

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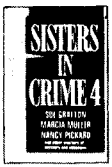

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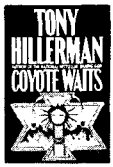

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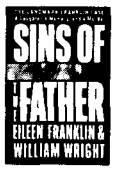

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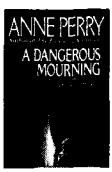

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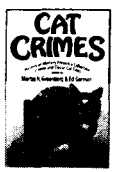

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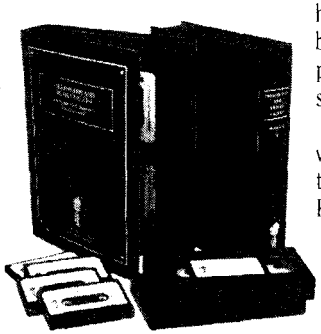

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a *NEW* John Francis Cuddy story by

JEREMIAH HEALY

Most fictional P.I.s have a sounding board, a character whose reactions serve as a measure of the soundness of their beliefs, not only about the case at hand, but about themselves—it goes with the territory, provides the necessary objective viewpoint in the first person story of the protagonist. But perhaps no fictional P.I. has a more effective mirror of his true self than John Francis Cuddy, who carries with him the voice of his deceased wife, a presence that gives his narrative a rich perspective. . . .

GEORGIE BOY

by JEREMIAH HEALY

1.

The waitress walked as though she were practicing to be fat. Her arms went out to the side eight inches past her hips, the hands flicking back and forth with every other step. Blonde and a little past thirty, she wore a black uniform with white piping. She stopped at my booth and an order book appeared from the front pocket in her apron, a cheap ballpoint from over her left ear.

I said, "How are you?"

She smiled a little, the right side of her mouth crooking up, the other side staying flat. "Fine. You?"

"Okay."

The woman gestured with the pen at the empty formica tabletop. "Coffee?"

The place was well air-conditioned, but the thermometer on a savings and loan three doors down had read eighty-eight degrees Fahrenheit. I looked past my waitress to the counter of the coffee

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shop, trying to read the little white letters pressed on to the black felt boards near the ceiling. "Lemonade, if you have it."

She smiled a little more. "You got it."

I watched her walk back past old-fashioned chrome stools toward the cash register. Another waitress, dark-haired with a ripe body pushing at her uniform, leaned an elbow on the counter, sneaking a look at me. A male voice yelled something from the kitchen and the other waitress said something back with enough Spanish accent on it that I didn't understand her.

I checked my watch. I was supposed to meet a woman named Cherie Malloy at the coffee shop ten minutes earlier. When Malloy had called my office in Boston, I'd asked her to come there, but she said she couldn't get off work for that long and asked if I could come out instead. Malloy said she knew the place and we could talk in private because it wouldn't be busy that time of the afternoon on a Wednesday in July. Ordinarily, I wouldn't have gone for it, but the week before had been slow, and the current one slower, so I did.

I looked around the coffee shop. It was empty enough, but I had the feeling from the way the Hispanic waitress had looked at me that I stood out as somebody who wasn't a regular. I didn't think Cherie Malloy was going to enjoy much privacy for our conversation.

If she showed at all.

I figured to give her one lemonade's worth and then chalk it up. My waitress started over with a large soda-fountain glass in her hand. The door to the kitchen behind her swung open, and a guy with one of those paper short-order caps stuck his head out. Looking exasperated, he yelled, "Cherie?"

My waitress stopped dead, looked at me, and bit her lip. The Hispanic waitress glared at the guy in the cap, who said to her, "What'd I do?"

My waitress continued on to my booth and set the glass of lemonade on a napkin. "You're John Cuddy, right?"

"Right."

"You're a private eye, you must think I'm pretty stupid, huh?"

A sentence long enough for me finally to recognize the voice on the phone. "Can you sit down?"

She looked back toward the counter, where the Hispanic waitress was still laying into the cook. Then Malloy arched her rump a little and slid into the bench on the other side of the booth, the leatherette squeaking under her.

I said, "Why'd you run a game on me?"

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Malloy shrugged. "See how you treated people."

I thought about it. "How I treated a waitress in a place I'd never been before."

"Right, right. I figure, you treat me okay in this dive before you think I'm a client, maybe you're a good guy to hire."

"I pass the test?"

Malloy gave me the crooked smile. "Yeah." She looked down at my left hand. "You married?"

"Widower."

"Oh." The smile lingered unconsciously before she realized it was still there. "Oh, Jesus. I'm sorry."

"That's okay. It's been . . . years now." I cleared my throat. "So what's this about?"

"My husband George."

"Divorce case?"

"Kind of."

"Sorry, Ms. Malloy. I could have told you on the phone—"

"No, no. It's not like I want you to follow him or anything. Hell, he's already walked out on me and Trudy."

"Trudy?"

Beneath the formica, she dug into the apron, coming up with a photo. I turned it around. A girl maybe three years old, a smaller and happier version of Cherie Malloy, looked toward the lens. The little girl was holding an ice-cream cone, what might have been strawberry running down the sides of the cone onto her fingers, tongue out trying to catch it. Malloy had the photo in a laminated holder, like a valuable baseball card.

"I keep that with me so's I can remind myself why I'm working here."

I passed back the plastic. "What do you want me to do?"

"Georgie Boy walked out three months ago to the day."

"And you want me to find him."

"Yeah, but not like that. Look, can I sort of just go through it? Then you can tell me if you're interested or not."

"Okay."

"Okay." Malloy set the photo of Trudy down carefully. "Georgie Boy and me, we got married four years ago. He met me maybe six months before that. Said to me, 'It's time I got married, settled down, Cher.' So we did. Then he wanted a baby, so I gave him Trudy. That's how he got his nickname. We was watching that movie, *Georgie Girl,* with that Redgrave actress does the weight commercials now. When

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he said he wanted a baby, like the woman in the movie, I started calling him 'Georgie Boy,' and it kind of stuck.

"When he got restless at work, he decided to go into real estate, DeNapoli Agency in town here. Not the greatest timing in the world, but he seemed to do okay at it. Then he wanted this classic Mustang, so he bought that."

I let her go, hoping I'd see a point to it or a way out of it.

Malloy fingered the photo. "Georgie Boy and me rented this little house. Never had the bucks for a down payment." She snorted a laugh. "Like the dentist who never gets his teeth fixed, Georgie Boy the real-estate man never bought a house. But we was doing okay, till he met this Southern belle?" Malloy drew out the last two words, lilting them at the end, as if she was imitating somebody. "She was a real lady, he told me. Didn't smoke, didn't curse, couldn't even drive a fu . . . car. But he told me he wanted her, because she knew how to keep a house, cook a meal. I ask you, how was I supposed to do all that with Trudy and this place keeping me running?"

"Ms. Malloy—"

"Sorry. No, really. I'm sorry. You don't have to hear all this sh . . . stuff. So, all right, Georgie Boy, he's real upfront about it. All businesslike. Comes home one day, tells me, 'Cher, I'm moving out.' Just like that, always so upfront. He packs his clothes and his pipes and his bicycle on the back of that Mustang and drives off. So I go to divorce court on him, and I get something called a temporary order, and Georgie Boy ain't too happy, but what can he do, even the judge tells him it's pay support or the judge puts something on his paycheck at the agency and I get my money that way."

Sensing I was about to say something, Malloy speeded up. "But Georgie Boy, he paid faithful, every Monday every week till two days ago."

"When he didn't."

"Right. So last night I called Scarlett O'Hara there and asked for him, and she said she ain't seen him since he left for work yesterday morning."

"How about work?"

She shook her head. "I called them, too. They say he never showed up on Tuesday."

"Ms. Malloy, I—"

"What I think is happening here, Georgie Boy is testing me, like I was testing you before. He's trying to see, am I gonna make a stink? Well, I called the cops, and they let me talk for like a minute

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before they said I oughta wait a while. I called the divorce court, and they said since I wasn't on welfare, I had to wait a while too, there was nothing they could do."

"So you want me to do what?"

"Kick over a few cans, find the one he's hiding under. Let him know I'm not going to take this."

"Ms. Malloy, I bill out at—"

She dipped back into the apron. "I don't have a lot of cash, but I figure it's money well spent to let Georgie Boy know he can't get away with this kind of thing. He's gotta pay me what he owes, else Trudy goes without, get me?"

I watched Malloy hold out a small stack of twenties that looked like she'd acquired them one at a time. I looked down at the plastic holder with Trudy's picture in it. Then I took out a pad and said, "I'll run a tab on it. You have a photo of George, too?"

She brought one out, a candid of a slimmer her and a guy in his thirties. Wiry, he was maybe six feet, with a thin mustache under a beak nose and a lock of brown hair across his forehead. He gave the camera the kind of yearbook smile that said nobody would want to talk with him at a high-school reunion.

I said, "His last name's Malloy, too?"

My client nodded.

"Description of his car?"

"Mustang, like I said." Malloy's voice dropped into a drone, like she was reciting something she'd heard over and over again. "Red convertible, sixty-seven, with white interior. Mint condition, the 289 engine. He's even got one of those key rings with like a little toy Mustang on it."

"Do you know his plate number?"

"It's what he calls a vanity plate."

"Go ahead."

"It's G-E-O, then a dash and B-O-Y."

Cute. "Where does he live now?"

She gave me an address, one town over.

"And the name of the woman he's with now?"

"Leah Anne something-or-other. She'll be at the house."

"You know anybody I should speak to at the DeNapoli Agency?"

"Probably Debby DeNapoli. She runs the place. But his best friend there was a guy named Steinfeld. Sam Steinfeld. I never met him, he was kind of Georgie Boy's guy friend, you know? Hit the bars, go to the ballgame, whatever."

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"Anybody else you can think of?"

"Who you should see, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Just Rosa."

"Rosa?"

Malloy turned halfway and said, "Rosa."

The Hispanic waitress left the counter and swayed toward us.

Malloy turned back to me. "Rosa lives like across the street from Georgie Boy's new place."

I decided to get out what I'd been wanting to say to her. "Ms. Malloy, a lot of people like your husband just want to . . . take a little time off from things sometimes."

Pocketing the photo of her daughter, Malloy stood up and slid out of the booth. "Believe me, Mr. Cuddy, Georgie Boy, he don't know what he wants. I gave him everything, and it wasn't enough."

2.

Rosa took about thirty seconds settling herself into the bench seat across from me that Cherie Malloy had been warming. Up close, she looked a little older than my client, with vivid red lipstick and lustrous black hair drawn back into a mane with metal barrettes. She carried with her a cigarette and one of those tin-foil ashtrays. Exhaling, she let the smoke wend out her nostrils, making the coffeeshop feel more like a 1940s nightclub. Rosa seemed very aware of her body and very interested in whether I was aware of it.

"So, you a private eye, eh?"

"John Cuddy."

"I'm Rosa."

"Your last name?"

"Echevarria."

She pronounced it "Et-chay-varr-*ee*-ah."

"Ms. Echevarria, I understand—"

"Rosa."

"Sorry?"

"Call me Rosa, John. Everybody does."

More smoke, a slow smile with more settling of the body into her seat.

"Rosa, I understand you live across the street from George Malloy's new place?"

"Not exactly across the street. We down a few houses."

"We?"

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She paused. "My son and me."

"How long have you been there?"

"Couple years."

"Since before George moved in?"

"Yeah, way before that."

"What can you tell me about him?"

A deep drag on the cigarette. "You got to tell Cherie all I'm gonna tell you?"

"Probably not."

"Her Georgie Boy, he seem to me real interested in his new woman."

"Leah Anne?"

"If that's her name."

"You don't know her?"

"Tried to say *hola* to her a couple times, when I first see her. I think she don't want to know the little spitfire from Guatemala."

Echevarria said "spitfire" with her eyes as well as her mouth, a word she'd heard somebody else use and thought I might like.

"Then you don't know her last name?"

A slow shake of the head.

"What does she look like?"

"Brown hair, okay face, tight . . . figure."

"What makes you think George liked her so much?"

"He was living with her. Pretty good sign, eh?"

"Anything else?"

A shrug. "I'm sitting on my porch, I see them. Sitting on their porch, walking sometimes, mostly in his hot car, the Mustang convertible. They do things together, even go shopping for food. Man, I tell you, Georgie Boy back that little car of his into the driveway, he got so many bags from the grocery store, you think the little car would break. But they unload into the garage like a couple of high-school kids on a first date, all joking and . . ."

Echevarria reached across the table to the pen in my right hand and ran her nails down my fingers. Funny, before then I hadn't noticed she'd painted them dark red.

". . . touching each other all the time, like this."

"So they seemed happy to you."

"In love."

Just then a stringy teenager in jeans and a purple tank top came through the front door. He was burning his eyes into me, watching Rosa turn toward him. The kid walked past Cherie and the cook

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without speaking or looking at them, coming toward us.

I watched his hands.

The kid stopped just short of my booth, hammering Spanish in a low mutter to Echevarria. She crackled back and waved him away. He retreated to a stool, but only rested his butt on it and crossed his arms.

Rosa brought her hand back to the foil ashtray, fiddling with it a little.

I said, "Your son?"

"Yes."

"What's his name?"

"Miguel."

"Does Miguel know George at all?"

"I don't ever see them together."

"Will he talk to me about George?"

"Not even if I tell him or you beat on him."

I nodded. I had the feeling I wasn't the first man Miguel had seen his mother getting friendly with. "You know George is missing."

"I know Cherie think he is."

"What do you think?"

"I think Georgie Boy the kind of man, he look around a lot, maybe see something."

"What kind of thing?"

"Maybe a new kind of thing he like."

"George ever look at you that way?"

The slow smile. "Wouldn't you?"

Echevarria gave me the address of Malloy's house. As she got up and walked her son out, he kept watching me. I kept looking at them, trying not to let Miguel know whether it was his mother or him I was watching.

3.

I drove my old Honda Prelude back into the city, moonroof and both windows open to manufacture a breeze, parking it behind my office. Upstairs, I got on the telephone.

"City Clerk, Parking."

"Cholly?"

"Speaking. Who's this?"

"John Cuddy."

"John. What's the matter, you get towed somewhere?"

"No, Cholly, but thanks for asking."

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"You guys, the Vatican was in Boston, you'd leave your wheels in the Pope's personal space."

"Not my car at all."

"What is it, then?"

"I got a plate I'd like you to watch for."

"Watch for. You mean like, run through the computer on the overdues?"

"That, too. But I want you to watch for this one on the ones coming across your desk."

"The ones . . . you mean the current tickets?"

"Yes."

"You out of your mind or what?"

"Cholly—"

"I get a thousand tickets a day coming through in here from all over the city, John. You want me to watch for a plate on one of them?"

"This is a vanity plate, Cholly."

"John, I don't care does it read PIUS XII, how am I—"

"Cholly, this is a fifty-dollar vanity plate we're talking about."

"Oh." I could hear somebody saying something to him in the background. Then in a louder voice Cholly said through the phone, "Let me just get a pen, Captain."

"Stolen Car Unit, Pingry."

"Big Earl, how are you?"

"Depends on who's asking."

"John Cuddy, Earl."

"Well, well. Somebody waste their time on that bomb of yours?"

"Not this time. I have a plate I'd like you to watch for."

"See if it turns up where it shouldn't?"

"Or anywhere else. I'm not sure it's stolen."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, the owner might still be driving it, Earl. I'd just like to know if anybody calls it in."

"A little dicey for me to enter it into the databank without a formal request."

"How about if the request comes from a former president?"

"Might depend on how well history regarded the man."

"Ulysses S. Grant?"

"An honor and a privilege to serve him."

* * *

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"Mrs. Feeney said these pink and whites would last a long time, even in this heat."

A good quality in a carnation, John.

I straightened up from the grave, looking down Beth's hillside to the harbor below. A couple of sailboards skittered on the same tack, the working boats long out and not likely back for a while. After I'd finished on the telephone, I figured it wouldn't hurt to make a visit before going out to George Malloy's new house.

Something on your mind, John?

I told her about my client from the coffee shop.

Thought you'd sworn off divorce cases.

"This is more a simple trace, Beth."

But if you find him, all he has to do is bolt again, right?

"Right."

So it doesn't seem your client gets much satisfaction for her money.

I looked back at the harbor. "Probably not."

Oh, John. You're not going to charge her, are you?

"Never can tell."

I always could.

I came back to the headstone. "No argument there."

4.

It was about six P.M. when I pulled up in front of George Malloy's address. The houses on both sides of the street were old wooden two-stories, all single-family with detached, one-car garages, except the corner buildings. Rosa Echevarria's house was easy to spot: Miguel lounged in an old sand chair on the shady porch of the corner house three doors down and across from Malloy's. Miguel gave me the finger as I got out of my car. I smiled at him and went up the empty, short driveway to Malloy's garage.

There was a stout, fairly new padlock on the swinging doors. I used my hand to shadow the webby glass panes at eye level. The Mustang wasn't there. The bicycle Cherie Malloy mentioned was silhouetted against a ghostly white background at the far end. There was an assortment of garden tools flush against the side walls, as though they generally had to yield to a car. Given the Mustang's potential collectability value, the padlock probably made a lot of sense.

"Can I help you?"

I turned toward the voice. A woman in her late twenties, medium height, with page-boy brown hair watched me through the screened back door of the house.

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"Are you Leah Anne?"

"That might depend on the gentleman doing the asking?"

She ended the sentence with a lilt, but more elaborately polite than flirty. I went toward her, taking my identification holder out from my pocket and extending it long before I reached her.

The woman half-opened the door and took the holder from me, mouthing the words on my ID as the scent of roasting duck wafted through the kitchen behind her. She was wearing an inexpensive dress but nice jewelry, her legs shapely over two-inch heels. I glanced around the backyard. Two white resin lawn chairs and a TV tray stood in the grass, as though two people often sat there but never had company over.

She closed my folder and returned it. "What does a private investigator want with me?"

"It's about George."

"Oh?"

"He is missing, right, Ms. . . . ?"

"Oh! I'm terribly sorry. It is Leah Anne. Leah Anne Darcelay?"

Another questioning lilt as she gave me her hand. A little dry, very delicate.

I said, "Could we step inside?"

Darcelay looked over her shoulder. "I'm afraid the duck is making the kitchen an oven today. Perhaps the lawn furniture?"

"Sure."

She led me to the little arrangement but didn't sit. "Can I offer you some lemonade?"

My day for citric acid. "Thank you."

"I'll be just a moment."

She walked back to the house with a bounce in her step. As Rosa Echevarría said, Leah Anne had a tight . . . figure.

Darcelay came out in a minute carrying a carved oak tray with a plastic pitcher and two simple tumblers filled with ice. There was a green leaf crushed in the bottom of each glass.

"My mother always put mint in her lemonade, and I've never varied from her good example."

Darcelay poured for both of us, then replaced the pitcher carefully on the tray. "My mother's also."

"I'm sorry?"

"This tray. An heirloom of sorts. I'm told it dates from just after the War Between the States."

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She sat down, brown eyes on me. "Now, how can I help you, Mr. Cuddy?"

"When was the last time you saw George Malloy?"

"Tuesday morning. He left for work quite early. Didn't even want me to get up and make his breakfast."

"You saw him leave?"

"From the bedroom window. He pulled out in his car, top down because it was such a fine day, like today. He waved to me as he drove away."

"You seem very calm, Ms. Darcelay."

She took a dainty sip of lemonade. "I am resigned, Mr. Cuddy."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't want to sound fatalistic, but I don't believe George is . . . missing on his own account?"

"You don't."

"Nossir. I believe something happened to George somewhere."

"Why?"

"Because of what he left behind."

"Such as?"

"Me."

Darcelay smiled, very politely.

"Anything else?"

"Yes. His pipe collection in the living room. His bicycle in the garage. His clothes in our bedroom."

"Perhaps he wanted to . . . make a clean break of it."

"Nossir. Nossir, you don't know George. He is a very forthright man. I cannot imagine him leaving me here, but if he decided to do it, he would have fessed up, face to face."

The same thing Cherie Malloy had said about him. "Have you been to the police?"

"I called them Tuesday evening, after George missed dinner? I'd cooked a beef roast, and it was his favorite, and he would never have missed it, even for a big business deal. The police told me I had to wait some further period of time before they could take a report on him."

"How about after that?"

"I called them again after his wife—Oh. Oh, my. You must be working for Cherie, then?"

"Go on."

"Well, I called them again after Cherie said he had missed his obligation. George believes very firmly in obligations, Mr. Cuddy."

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"Did you call his office?"

"No. No, they called me here. A Miss DeNapoli?"

"Debby DeNapoli?"

"Perhaps. She seemed quite upset about George."

"She tell you why?"

"Why she was upset?"

"Yes."

"I assume she was worried about him, too."

"George have any good friends at the office?"

"He often spoke about someone named Sam. A Jewish last name, I believe."

Sam Steinfeld, according to Cherie Malloy. "Had George . . . gone off before?"

"Nossir. George was a solid man, Mr. Cuddy. Solid. We were saving toward a down payment on a real . . . on another home, so as to move up to a better neighborhood? He was quite attentive to his work."

"Would you mind if I saw the inside of the house?"

"Why . . . no, no if you believe it would help you."

Darcelay stood and set down her drink. I did the same, then followed her into the kitchen. I could see what she meant about moving up. The room was immaculate, but the cabinets were warped, the stove roasting the duck was an old gas range, and the refrigerator a narrow jobbie like the one in the condo I rented.

We started with the living room. Cheap, mismatched furniture with striking accessories like the old oak tray. Next to the best chair in the room was a rack of pipes and a couple of folded pouches, that thick, cherry flavor of pipe tobacco in the air.

Upstairs was a bedroom with a queen-sized fourposter covered by an elaborate, frilled comforter that looked custom-made. Across the hall was a sewing room/home office with accompanying, tinny furnishings. The clothes in the closets were carefully ironed and hung at one-inch intervals. Even the bathroom was spotless.

"Basement?"

"Of course."

We went back downstairs and down again. Hot-water heater and other guts of the house. A few tools on a pegboard, none of them looking much used except a wrench and a screwdriver. I fingered them.

"George uses those for his bicycle."

"In the garage."

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"Yes."

"Anything else out there?"

"More tools, some car things. George keeps it padlocked, on account of the bicycle and the Mustang?"

"You have a key?"

"I did have, but I lost it, and he keeps the only other one with him."

I headed toward the stairs to the first floor. "George ride his bicycle around here?"

Darcelay followed me up. "Nossir. He likes to go over to the river, ride it there."

"How does he get there?"

"Sometimes he rides it, sometimes he takes it on this metal contraption he straps to the trunk of the car."

Back upstairs, I smelled something burning from the kitchen. Darcelay hurried past me.

She opened the door to the oven, and some smoke came out. "I am afraid this stove is not quite reliable anymore."

"Thanks for your time, Ms. Darcelay."

"You'll be going, then?"

"Yes."

"Would you like to take some duck with you?"

"No, thanks."

"Even a little singed, it's quite a good recipe. Cooking and keeping a house, that's what I'm best at."

Leah Anne Darcelay gave me a brave little smile. I turned to leave just as the corners of her eyes welled up, maybe from the smoke.

5.

I parked at the curb in front of the DeNapoli Real Estate Agency at nine-thirty Thursday morning. The agency seemed to occupy all of a modest but perfectly restored clapboard colonial, white with green shutters. There didn't seem to be very much going on, just one car in the parking lot that had been paved over the right sideyard of the house. That one car was a beauty, though. A four-door Mercedes, black with tan interior.

Pushing open the heavy entrance door, I saw a woman barely into her twenties behind a reception desk inside the foyer. She had long brown hair drawn back and slightly frizzed over a silk blouse that had to stretch a bit to cross her chest. Her eyes were big and green,

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but the make-up couldn't quite cover the bags under them nor do much for the bloodshot look in them. There was a small brass plaque on her desk that said "BECCA."

The woman said, "Can I help you?"

"I'd like to see Mr. Steinfeld."

"Sam—uh, Mr. Steinfeld isn't in today." Her hand reached for a pink pad. "Would you like to leave a message?"

"Actually, I'm really looking for George Malloy."

Malloy's name pushed a button inside her. She swallowed with some difficulty and picked up the telephone. "Debby? There's a Mr. . . . ?"

Becca looked up sheepishly, like I shouldn't think she was always like this.

I said, "Cuddy. John Cuddy."

Into the phone, Becca said, "There's a Mr. John Cuddy here to see George."

Becca's voice had a little trouble with his first name, but she nodded into the phone and looked back up at me. "Ms. DeNapoli will be right out."

Becca wasn't wrong. If I'd wanted to sit down, I wouldn't have had time before a compact woman in a blue pants suit appeared in a doorway that looked as though it would lead to the biggest room on the floor. She was my age or a little older, with sharp eyes and big earrings and what would have been called a Pixie haircut when the Beatles were on Ed Sullivan.

DeNapoli came forward and extended her hand. "Debby DeNapoli, Mr. Cuddy."

We shook firmly. At that range, she looked awfully tired for the shank of the morning, and I thought about Leah Anne Darcelay telling me how upset DeNapoli had been on the telephone.

George's boss said, "Becca, please hold my calls," and used her head to ask me to follow her back toward the doorway.

DeNapoli's office had a bay window looking out toward the street and French doors on the other side of the room. The doors led onto a flagstone patio, a small marble fountain in the center of it and rosebushes surrounding it. The office itself was done in mahogany and oxblood leather, brass tacks anchoring the seams of three easy chairs that paid homage to the desk like the Magi at the Manger. DeNapoli used her head again, this time to gesture me toward one of the easy chairs as she took the desk chair.

"You're looking for George?"

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I sat down. "That's right."

"You're not a client of this office."

DeNapoli said it as if she didn't need me to confirm it.

I decided to wait her out.

She watched me, pursing her lips. "Police?"

"No. Private investigator."

"You have any identification?"

I took it out and handed it across the desk. DeNapoli glanced at it as if she'd seen one before, then closed it and tossed it back to me. Not rudely. More as if she just couldn't spare the energy to get up.

"What's this about, Mr. Cuddy?"

"I've been asked to look for George Malloy."

DeNapoli watched me some more.

I said, "Given how you and Becca out there seem to be taking it, though, somehow I think there's more to it than employee absenteeism."

DeNapoli closed her eyes and was so still that for a second I was afraid she'd fallen asleep. Then the eyes came open abruptly. "Do you have any idea where George is?"

"Not yet."

DeNapoli breathed very slowly. "I haven't called the police. The newspapers would . . . It could ruin my business, it gets out."

"What did George do, Ms. DeNapoli?"

This time she huffed out a breath. "I've spent twenty years building this business, Mr. Cuddy. Took it over after my father died. We've been rock solid, all the time he ran the agency, all the time since."

"Until now."

DeNapoli let her chin drop and used the index fingers of both hands to rub her temples. "This was supposed to be my vacation week. Down at the Cape. I take one week a month in the summer. I'm down there, I get a call from Becca on Tuesday, saying the bank is a little concerned about something. I call my banker, guy I've known since high school. He tells me two of my brokers came into a branch of the bank Monday afternoon just after lunch. One of them's George Malloy. George goes to an assistant manager at this branch, uses his signature authority to get a certified check drawn from our escrow fund there. You know what that is?"

"Where you park other people's money pending closings?"

"Right. We had three sales pending at the time, which is damned good for this market. So, we had one-sixty in the escrow, and George gets a certified for one-fifty of that."

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"A hundred-fifty thousand."

"Right. Certifieds like that, you use them all the time. The assistant manager knows George, doesn't think anything of it."

"But?"

"But there's no closing scheduled on any of those deals right now. Plus, it seems George and the other broker leave that branch, and about an hour later the certified is cashed at another branch."

"Cashed for one-fifty?"

"This market, it happens."

"Do I get to guess whose signature is on the check?"

DeNapoli closed her eyes.

I said, "So it's three o'clock Monday afternoon, and George Malloy has a bagful of cash that isn't his."

"And isn't mine, either, except the agency's responsible for it."

"You have George bonded?"

The eyes opened. "Of course. The surety company, it'll make the money good for the clients. But if this gets out . . ."

"It won't if I can help it, Ms. DeNapoli."

"I don't know who you're working for, but I wouldn't mind you telling me when you find George."

"Any idea at all where he could be?"

DeNapoli pursed her lips again. "Becca wasn't sitting where you came in, crying her eyes out every ten minutes, I'd have said he was with her."

"Office romance?"

"She's just a kid, and George is married—still married to somebody, living with somebody else. I never put my foot down. I mean, it's a free country, and both of them were doing their jobs just fine, but it was hard not to notice them kind of disappearing around lunchtime."

Georgie Boy, Georgie Boy. "The other broker at the bank. Sam Steinfeld?"

"That's right."

"Is he gone, too?"

"Tuesday, after Becca calls me, I drive back from the Cape like a bat out of hell and drag him in here. Sam says he rode to lunch with George and then went into the bank with him after lunch on Monday, but wasn't paying any attention what George was doing. Sam says he didn't have any customers that afternoon, so he decided to call it a day and asked George to just drop him at home." DeNapoli

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shook her head. "That's why I can only take a week at a time. While the cat's away, the mice run wild, you know?"

"So Steinfeld claims he wasn't with Malloy for the check cashing."

"And the guy at the branch that did the cashing says he saw only George."

Which didn't mean the other broker wasn't out in the Mustang, waiting for Malloy to leave the bank. "Where's Steinfeld now?"

"I sent him home Tuesday. Told him to take a couple of vacation days till I could sort this thing out."

"You're thinking either Malloy or Steinfeld took the money Monday and you haven't called the cops yet?"

"They worked for me, both of them. I put bread in their mouths and roofs over their heads, all right? It's a little hard to accept one of them, or both of them, stealing from me."

"I were you, I'd call the surety company on the bond. They have notice of claim requirements."

Close to a smile. "Thanks. I spent most of Tuesday night reading through the policy, then getting my lawyer out of some fishing camp up in Maine there so she could read it, too." DeNapoli's lips went back to the pursed look. "Anything else?"

"Two things. I want to talk with Becca."

"Brace yourself for a flood. What's the other thing?"

"Sam Steinfeld's home address."

6.

"But I didn't know he was gonna steal it! I thought he . . . saved it, you know?"

I waited while Becca used the third Kleenex she'd pulled from the little cellophane packet. We were sitting in the conference room of the DeNapoli agency, door shut, air a little close between Becca's perfume and emotions.

I said, "Where were you and Malloy supposed to run off to?"

A sniffle. "George said, 'Let's just let the road take us where it will.' "

Poetic. "Becca, how did you think George Malloy saved so much money on his commissions?"

"He was just so . . . smooth. He said everything with like, confidence, I dunno. I was in love with him, I wanted to believe in him, too."

"What was the deal?"

A swipe of the Kleenex under her nose. "The deal?"

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"How were you going to meet up with him?"

"Oh. He was supposed to pick me up Monday night, and we'd drive through the night till he figured we were far enough away to stop, get a room and some . . . sleep."

"Monday night?"

"Yeah."

Leah Anne Darcelay said he'd taken off Tuesday morning. "You and George have any back-up plan?"

"Uh-unh. It was gonna be simple, see? He packs his stuff Monday night, picks me up, then we take off."

Except his stuff never got packed, and he hung around till Tuesday morning. "He wasn't supposed to give you a call, let you know he'd be to your place in ten minutes or whatever?"

"Uh-unh." Becca reached for another Kleenex.

"When he didn't show up on Monday night, what did you do?"

"I waited and I worried. I couldn't exactly call *him,* you know?"

"Because he'd be at his house."

"With that woman he was with."

Becca said it with a little more bite than I thought her own glass house could tolerate.

"How friendly was George with Sam Steinfeld?"

A shrug. "I dunno. They were friends, did a lot of stuff together after Sam's divorce."

"When was that?"

"I dunno, six, eight months ago. Terrible thing, he had like three kids, teenagers. His wife and the kids moved back to her parents out-of-state somewheres, left Sam with his house all to himself."

And probably a hell of a court-ordered support burden. "Sam have money problems?"

"It's a recession, okay? Everybody's got money problems."

"Except for George Malloy, who 'saved' all that money."

Becca shook her head and reached for the last of the Kleenex.

7.

Sam Steinfeld's address turned out to be a split-level on a nice block, with a manicured lawn and two-car garage, double door up. Inside the garage slumped a four-door Chevy the vintage of my Prelude. The sedan looked like a horse in the barn at the end of a long day on the trail. The other stall had no car but lots of gardening implements and tools spread over it, as though it had been a while since the Chevy had a stablemate. As I walked toward the front

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door, I heard the sound of an electric drill from the back of the house, so I wound around the garage past some flower beds.

The backyard was a postage stamp, but even its small space was being filled by a partially constructed deck. All the concrete footings were embedded in the ground, small metal shafts projecting above half of them. The other half already had wooden posts mounted on them. A stocky man with curly black hair and a sleeveless sweatshirt was holding a yellow object that looked like a Flash Gordon ray gun in his hand. He unplugged it from the long orange extension cord and walked toward me, stepping over some pressure-treated decking boards that awaited the other wooden posts going in to support them.

"Help you with something?"

"Sam Steinfeld?"

"That's right."

"My name's John Cuddy." I inclined my head toward the deck. "Nice work so far."

Steinfeld ran a burly forearm over his brow, moving some sweat around. "Always liked working with tools. Had a few days coming to me, so I figured, get a jump on the job while the weather's still good."

"Debby DeNapoli already told me why you have a few days off."

Steinfeld gritted his teeth. "I'll sue her. I'll sue her for libel."

"Slander."

"Huh?"

"It's libel if somebody writes it about you, slander if they just say it."

"You a lawyer?"

"Private investigator. I'm trying to find George Malloy."

"Malloy?" Steinfeld turned away to spit, vigorously but politely. "That's what I think of my good friend George Malloy."

"Want to tell me about it?"

"Why should I?"

"Be good practice for when you have to explain things to the police."

Steinfeld considered that. "Okay. But not too long."

"So you can get back to the deck."

"That's right."

"You have any idea Malloy was pulling an embezzlement?"

"Hell, no. Monday, he asks me do I want to have some lunch, and I say sure. So we do, have a couple of pops at this pub, then he says

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he has to stop at the bank. I go in with him, kind of talk with this cute teller while he's doing something with one of the manager guys. Then he gives me a lift home here."

"And you start on the deck."

"I go out and figure the materials I need and buy them."

"Malloy never let on what he was going to do?"

"Hell, no. I'm telling you, he set me up."

"Set you up how?"

"He has me go into the bank with him, to get the check, Debby says. I never see it, he never mentions it. Understand?"

"He uses you as cover for what he's doing."

"Right, right. So nobody'll suspect him. All the time, though, he's using me, make me look bad, maybe deflect some attention over to me."

"You knew about him and Becca?"

"Becca? Of course I did. Have to be blind not to. Understand, George is the kind of guy, he sees something he wants, he goes after it."

"Like with the classic car."

"George got that car, I told him, it's not practical, George. The clients, they like to ride around in air conditioning, plenty of legroom. Well, turns out a lot of clients are like you and me. They remember that car from when they were young, it makes them feel good."

"But that's not why Malloy got it."

"Hell, no. The car, the clothes, the women. Chasing on the side got me divorced. Chasing things, anything, that's what George lives for."

I took in the house. "Big place to rattle around in by yourself."

"Huh. This economy, it's cheaper for me to live in it than try to sell it or rent it. Besides, I got used to having a house for all my tools and stuff. Couldn't get used to an apartment or condo if I tried."

"Still, must be a heavy nut to make each month, carrying this place and supporting the wife and kids someplace else."

Steinfeld squinted at me, clenching his fist. "What does that have to do with George bugging out?"

"You think that's what happened?"

"Think? I know that's what happened. He got an idea of something he wanted, he went after it."

"But left without Becca."

"Who knows. Maybe he had another one besides her on the side."

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Something clicked. "Malloy ever mention a woman who lived across the street from him?"

"Just some Hispanic. Said she looked like a hot number but she worked with his ex."

"His wife, you mean."

"Yeah. I remember him saying he wouldn't mind giving her a try, but she had a problem with his wife being her friend and all."

"She had the problem."

"Right. Georgie Boy, he didn't have what you and I might call scruples, understand?"

I looked down at the concrete footings peeking above the grass line. "How long do you have to let those cure before you can work on them?"

Steinfeld looked at me strangely. "Not that long. They been in a while."

"How long?"

He looked down at his drill. "Since Tuesday afternoon."

8.

When I got back to my office, there was a message on my answering service to call Earl Pingry at the Stolen Car Unit.

"Pingry."

"Earl, John Cuddy."

"Ah, the man representing Ulysses S. Grant."

"The same, Earl. What've you got?"

"Got your vehicle."

"How?"

"Punk was driving the Mustang around Beacon Hill. Showing off, you can believe it. Punk runs a light on Charles, broadsides a car coming down Beacon Street itself."

"Car wrecked?"

"Not too bad. Just lousy luck for the punk."

"Hurt?"

"Hurt? Oh, no, man. Nothing like that. Though he almost was."

"I don't get you."

"The car he broadsides belongs to an Area A cop, just made the last payment on it this month. My brother officer spread-eagles the punk over the trunk of the Mustang, probably would have busted his skull there weren't twenty witnesses around."

"Where's the punk now?"

"Area A. Want to talk to him?"

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"If I can."

"Just go on down there, use my name."

"Thanks, Earl. You have his name?"

"The punk?"

"Right."

"Yeah, hold . . . on . . . just—here it is. Tough one. 'Etcha-*var*-ya, Miguel.' "

I let out a breath. "Earl, I think it's pronounced 'Et-chay-varr-*ee*-ah.' "

The interrogation-room table at Area A looked as though it had been a training ground for foul-mouthed termites. Miguel Echevarría, dressed in jeans and a Miami Sound Machine tee-shirt, scowled up at me from a battered wooden chair. The detective who brought me into the room was named Milano. She stood behind Echevarría, leaning her head against the wall, while a male detective named Quinn sat at the end of the table and smiled at him. I wouldn't have wanted Quinn smiling at me like that.

Milano had cleared me in the hall to speak to Echevarría, who apparently hadn't wanted a lawyer present for any of this because he "didn't do nothing to worry about."

I sat across from Echevarría, Milano still taking up some wall space, Quinn still just smiling.

I said, "Miguel."

"Who say you get to use my first name?"

"I do," said Quinn.

Echevarría didn't like Quinn's smile, either.

I said, "Miguel, how did you get ahold of George Malloy's car?"

"Was sitting in his driveway, man. Waiting for me, like."

"Where was Malloy?"

"How am I supposed to know?"

"Weren't you afraid he'd see you boosting the car and recognize you?"

"Didn't take no time at all, man."

"To pop the ignition and—"

Echevarría came forward in the chair. "Didn't have to, man. Keys were in it. Like I didn't really steal the thing at all, man."

Quinn chuckled, deep in his throat, never breaking the smile. Milano held up a key ring with a miniature Mustang on it, jingling it like a little hand bell.

I said to her, "Can I see those?"

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She dropped them into my palm. Besides the car token, it had two car keys, a house key, and a heavier, office-style key. I hefted them, thinking, until Milano asked for them back.

I turned to Echevarria. "The keys were in the car."

"Like I said, man."

"When did you take it?"

"Couple days ago."

"Which day?"

"I don't know, man. Was the day before I seen you hanging around my mother."

"The day before you saw me in the booth at the coffee shop."

"Right."

"That means you took the car Tuesday."

Echevarria hooded his eyes, got cagey. "You say so."

Quinn said, "Don't you just love him?"

Milano grunted, like it wasn't the first time she'd heard Quinn use the line.

I said, "Why'd you take the car, Miguel?"

"It was there."

"Was it because of the way Malloy looked at your mother?"

Echevarria was up and reaching across for me. Quinn was a beat slow, but Milano had both hands on Echevarria's shoulder from behind, like a dance step they'd practiced. She slammed him back down again hard enough to compact his spine.

Echevarria grimaced and twisted in the chair, but spoke only Spanish to us for a minute. Even Quinn cut him a little slack before saying, "Now in English, braintrust."

I waited for Echevarria to stare him down a minute. Then, "Miguel?"

He looked back at me.

"Miguel, where did you keep the car the last few days?"

"Friend of mine, he's got this old garage. I kept it there."

"Why?"

Echevarria gave me a disgusted look. "Fresh car like that wouldn't last ten minutes on the street, man. I wanted to cruise the wheels for a while, you know?"

I thought about it. There was one way it all made sense, maybe. To the detectives, I said, "Either of you see the Mustang at the accident scene?"

Quinn said, "I saw it when they were towing it away."

"Was there a bicycle carrier on the back of it?"

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"No."

I turned to Echevarría, who was looking at me wide-eyed. "Miguel, when you took the car, it had a bicycle carrier on the back of it, right?"

The eyes got wider. "How'd you know that, man?"

"So it did."

"Yeah. The mother, he use the rack thing to carry his bike when he go for a ride on it."

"What happened to the carrier?"

"I took it off, man."

"Why?"

Echevarría looked at Quinn and me. "Spoils the image, you know?"

Milano told me they'd gotten a call that Echevarría's mother was on her way. I sat in the area just inside the stationhouse door until I saw Rosa and my client bustle in, still wearing their black and white waitress uniforms.

When I stood up, Rosa noticed me and stopped dead. Her face had aged a couple of years in the few days since I'd seen her, and she lost another few months examining mine for news about her son.

"Miguel, is he . . ."

"He's all right, Rosa."

Cherie Malloy said, "What are you doing here?"

I looked at her. "It would help if I could talk to Rosa for a minute in private."

Rosa looked bewildered but eager. Cherie, shaking her head, said, "Sure, sure. Whatever you say."

I drew Rosa off to the side while Cherie Malloy took my seat on the bench.

Echevarría said, "What is happening here?"

"You knew Miguel had George's car."

"Not when I talk with you, I don't."

"But you realized it."

"I see him. . . . After you talk to me, I see him with the keys, but I . . ." She looked back over her shoulder at Cherie Malloy. "But I don't tell Cherie because I don't want Miguel to get in trouble for it."

"He is in trouble for it, Rosa."

She spoke quickly. "I know he been going off somewhere, doing things. But he always is doing things."

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"Rosa, I'm trying to keep this down to just joy-riding."

"Just . . ." Echevarría paused. "What can I do to help my son?"

"Answer an odd question."

"What is it?"

I lowered my voice. "Back at the coffee shop, you told me you used to watch George Malloy and Leah Anne unloading the groceries at their garage."

Echevarría looked confused. "Yes?"

"Why did they do that?"

9.

"Veal chops?"

"Why, yes."

"Go through the duck, already?"

"No. No, there's still plenty left."

"Can I have some?"

"Surely can. Come on in."

I followed Leah Anne Darcelay from the back door into the old kitchen. She busied herself pulling a steak knife from a butcher-block holder near the sink and a dinner plate from the cabinet over it. From one drawer came a silver fork, beautifully polished, from another a cloth napkin, beautifully ironed. Darcelay laid the place setting on a woven grass mat at one side of the little kitchen table, then turned to the narrow refrigerator. As she opened the door, I could see each wire shelf inside was chock full of cooked meat, wrapped in plastic or baggies and stacked like a carefully loaded moving van.

Tugging out the duck, Darcelay suddenly stopped and took a breath. She turned to me, forgetting to close the fridge. "Oh, Lordy, you've guessed, haven't you?"

I said, "You might want to shut the door."

"Oh. Oh, yes." She did, then placed the duck package very carefully on the table. "Was it something I said?"

"Three things. One, the timing was off. Why would George hang around till Tuesday morning instead of leaving Monday night?"

Darcelay nodded.

"Second, there was no padlock key for the garage on George's key chain when the police took it off the car thief."

Another nod. "Yes. Yes, I needed that, you see. I'd lost mine, as I told you?"

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My turn to stop. A little more slowly, I said, "The third was you saying you watched him drive off Tuesday morning. It didn't fit with what the car thief said."

Darcelay didn't nod. "You would take the word of a car thief over mine?"

"*You left the keys in the car.*"

This time I got the nod. "It was very difficult. I can't drive, and I knew that no one would believe George had disappeared if his car was still here. I was sure that if I left the keys in the Mustang one of the degenerate children in this neighborhood would steal it and leave it somewhere vile."

"At which point the police would try to trace George from wherever the car was found."

"But the body, that was even harder, you see."

"Heavy."

"Oh, my yes. Too heavy to carry him anywhere."

I inclined my head toward the garage. "George went out there to get his bicycle, leaning against the . . . freezer."

"Yes. He was going to take everything he really cared about and run off with that . . . secretary. He told me here, right here in my own kitchen. Then he went off with his keys in hand, opening the padlock on the garage, going inside, taking out the rack, mounting it on the car. All . . . routine, like he was just going for a short bike ride before sitting down to the lovely meal I'd cooked for him."

"And you had to cook quite a few meals after that."

"Oh, my, yes. George barely fit in the freezer, even with all the roasts taken out. And this little refrigerator, it has such a small freezer compartment? I've had to cook up a storm, I'll tell you." Darcelay bit her lower lip. "I'm afraid I'm going to lose the turkey to the heat, though."

Very quietly, I said, "The money?"

"Oh. Oh, that's what really did it, you know? It's in a suitcase upstairs. I tried to put it under the mattress, like you see in the movies. But there was so much of it, the comforter would ride up and look too short for the bed?"

I think I just stared at her.

"I'm not sure what I would have done if I hadn't followed George out to the garage. But he was home so early, really quite early for him? And he marched out there in that forthright manner of his." Darcelay mocked a toy soldier's stiff arm movements. "And I followed him and asked him what he was doing. And he just began

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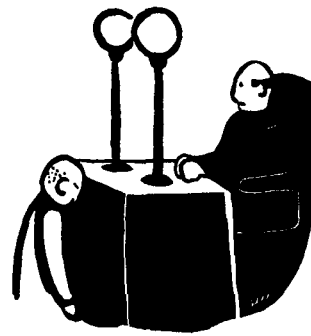
explaining how he was leaving and started putting that rack on the car with a screwdriver and when he came back into the garage, he set down the screwdriver and reached into his pocket and took out this wad of bills and began counting them off and then he tried to give them to me, telling me it would 'tide me over,' pushing them on me like I was some . . . some *whore* he was paying off and so I grabbed the screwdriver and then I . . . I . . ."

Leah Anne Darcelay picked up the steak knife from my place setting and tried to show me.



DETECTIVERSE

JUSTICE

by JANE OPPENHEIMER

The author got life
But the judge set him free,
Though he'd murdered the language
With obvious glee.

The judge then explained:
"His book so unnerved
That an incomplete sentence
Is what he deserved."

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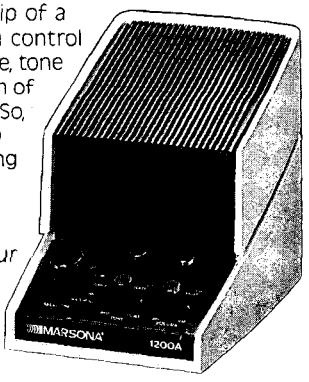

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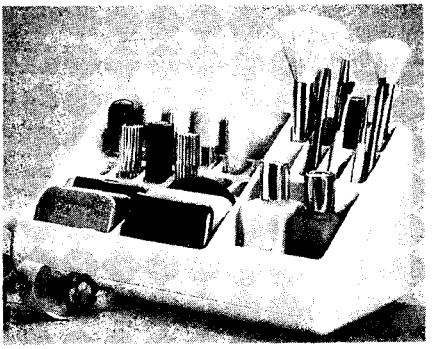

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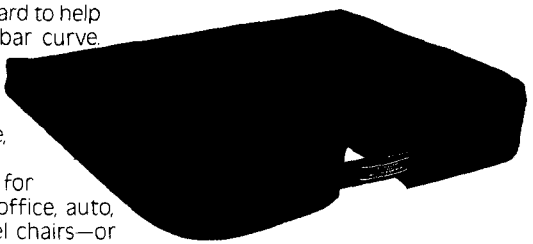

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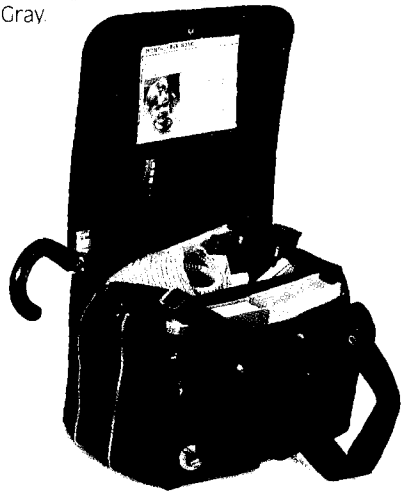

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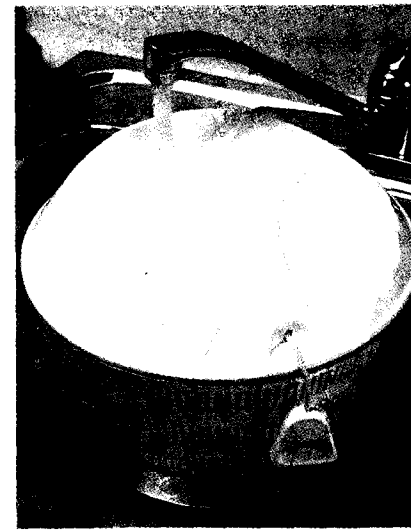

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a *NEW* short story by

ANTONIA FRASER

Historian, biographer, mystery writer, Lady Antonia Fraser says she aims "to produce a straightforward mystery story (if that is not a contradiction in terms!) . . . I have a horror of blood dripping from the page, thinking effects are better achieved with more subtlety" (Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers). *And so she demonstrates with this engrossing tale of mother love. . . .*

THE MAN WHO WIPED THE SMILE OFF HER FACE

by ANTONIA FRASER

I think of her smiling and certain catchphrases, songs will always bring her back to me. Even that cheerful refrain roared out: "Pack up your troubles . . . and smile, smile, smile." Then I remember my Lara with her soft upward curve of the lips. And I weep.

Of course, long before it happened, he had tried to wipe the damned smile off her face. His language, not mine; and rather cleaned up. (He didn't say damned.) He simply exploded out of the blue, in that way he had, over nothing.

"I'll wipe that—damned—smile off her face, you see if I don't. And yours too, for that matter, yours too—" He stopped. I waited. What was he going to call me? That was the clue.

Finally he pronounced it sarcastically: "Yours too, Mother." Medium bad. Definitely worse than Virginia, much worse than Ginny (used only in a *very* good temper, that is, after two drinks and no more) but not as bad as "Mummie." He hated that word, hated to hear it, that is, so it was look-out time when Tom called me that. I

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once went so far as to ask Lara—privately—not to use "Mummie" in front of Tom. After all, he was her husband, and for the sake of harmony, what did a little thing like a name matter? Lara laughed: real laughter this time, not just a smile.

"Oh Mummie! sorry, *Mother*—no that's too formal. Sounds as if we didn't love each other. Kind of Victorian and respectful. As if you're my aged parent. Whereas, on the contrary . . . I'll call you 'Darling'—how about that? If I remember. That way I'll call you both Darling, you and Tom. But I can't call you Virginia, let alone Ginny. The trouble is, for twenty-three years I've been calling you Mummie."

I suppose, looking back with as much detachment as I can—not a great deal under the circumstances—that was indeed the trouble. She had been calling me Mummie for twenty-three years, and she had been calling Tom "Darling" for only two years one month at the time of this conversation; two years and a half when *it* happened.

When Tom first met my Lara, she was twenty. Or rather that was when he saw her and, as he put it, fancied her something rotten, those long legs in her little white shorts, her figure (not the word he actually used) in her skinny T-shirt. His language was always so coarse! And the man matched the language.

He saw Lara at the Plantagenet Tennis Club where she sometimes worked as a pro. She'd have liked to work there all the time, and heaven knows, the members would have been happy enough. I can tell you, everyone always wanted to book Lara. But the other girls got mean behind her back, said she pinched other people's clients, that sort of thing. Wouldn't let her be permanent on the staff. Pure jealousy; it upset me, but Lara ignored it. She concentrated on other things.

"Oh Mummie, forget it. Trust me," she'd say jokingly, "I'm working on our future."

Then the day came when Tom did manage to play with Lara: thus infuriating Sam, his regular coach, I believe. But it was simply a mix-up. Tom got the impression Sam was sick, and Sam never got his message that he wanted to play that day. Lara was available and so quite naturally she filled in. Nothing more to it than that.

Lara came rushing home to me with the news: "Mummie, let me tell you about this brilliant man I just met. He's fabulous. Tall, dark, and handsome. Well, to be honest, quite tall, very dark, and not particularly handsome."

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"And rich?" I asked lightly. It was a bit of fun between us. One day Lara would find a fellow who was tall, dark, handsome, and rich. He'd look after her and she'd look after me. I regarded her expression. The famous natural smile made it difficult to read sometimes, even for me. She'd had it since babyhood, even in repose, so that at school they ticked her off.

"Stop smiling, Lara."

"I can't, Miss Hopkinson, it's my natural curve." Plenty of hilarity at that! Even at eleven years old, Lara was an eye-catcher.

"I believe he is quite rich," said my Lara, deadpan. "He's called Tom Barney." Lara certainly knew how to deliver a punchline. *Tom Barney*. Phew.

"He's a member?"

"He doesn't play regularly. Of course he's abroad a lot. The boat. The plane. The deals. You know."

"I know. Or rather I can guess." It was my turn to smile.

After it happened, people pretended that Lara hooked Tom Barney, went out to get him and duly made the catch. Everything had been carefully planned: so that we, or rather I, deserved what came to me. How ridiculous!

Jealousy again. People are so cruel. As you can see, Tom was the one who made the first move, went after her. In those days he loved her, worshipped her, adored her. No blows, no rages. It took him ages to persuade her to marry him—after all, he was twice her age. To put it another way, he was old enough to be her father, or rather her parent, her surviving parent, me. Tom Barney was exactly the same age as I was.

Then it changed. All the things he shouted at her! "You cold-hearted bitch, I gave you everything, you—" Bitch was the least of it. The anger always came very suddenly. Right to the last, I never learned to read Tom Barney's moods. Oh yes, it would certainly have been better for my Lara if I had. . . . And did she? Even now, I can't tell you that. I can weep for her and I do, but I can't tell you about her secret heart. Like her, it's lost to me forever.

We were so close as mother and daughter, too close many people said. She was born when I was twenty, and her father—least said about him the better. An older man, a married man. He took advantage of me, forced me—then left me when the baby came, said he had never wanted that, blamed me. The lawyers gave me enough money to bring her up on condition no more demands were made. I had to sign something. So Lara never knew her father. But just

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because we were so close, Lara kept one precious bit of herself completely private. Lara was like her smile: she tantalised you and she charmed you, and you could never be absolutely certain—but I mustn't think like that. I must go back to thinking about her as she was. My Lara.

I'll go back to the beginning. Did she love Tom? An unlikely thought perhaps, my lovely young girl and that gorilla with his long hairy arms. He used to make me shudder looking at him in the pool at Stair, the house in Kent. But of course I kept the shudder to myself. Yet Lara may have loved Tom—at the beginning, before the anger. After all, he was so crazy about her and she had a loving nature. Everything she wanted was hers: including having me to live with her, to live with them. That was no problem, not really. Lara spoke to him so sweetly about it, and then Tom came to me.

"Ginny," he said—those were the good old days. "You've had a tough life. Lara's been telling me about it, your struggle, all you did for her. Come and live with us. You'll have everything you want, your own flat, self-contained, your privacy. Besides, Lara will be traveling with me a lot. She's looking forward to that, her new life. So never fear, we shan't always be on top of you. And then when the babies come—"

"Babies," I said sharply, more sharply than I meant, "I don't know about that." It was a mistake. I just blurted it out; me, usually so controlled, as I've had to be in my life—a struggle indeed, as Lara had told Tom. But Tom made light of it at that point. We were still in the merry days.

"You may not know about babies, Mother"—that was the first time he used the word, and then as a sort of joke—"but I do. And so does my little Lara. Or she will." I should explain that Tom's first wife never had any children. She died just about the time Tom made all his money. Just as well, perhaps. She didn't look much from the photograph I saw: they'd been childhood sweethearts or something. After her death, there were a series of women, girls really, all quite young—but of course none quite as young or quite as pretty as my Lara.

So how long were we all three happy? When did Tom's rages really start? The idea of babies—was it that? He certainly went on about babies a good deal, did Tom. I learnt my lesson from that first unfortunate remark and held my peace, although to me of course Lara was still just a baby herself. But Tom was always talking about 'babies before he was too old to enjoy them,' sentimental stuff like

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that. Was it Lara's fault he was so much older than she was? Hardly. No wonder Lara began to say no—no to babies, and no to, well, what makes babies.

Were there any good things to be said about Tom? Yes. Tom was generous. I can be honest enough to say that. The man was a brute—the mere sight of their wedding photograph told you that: him so broad, those heavy shoulders, and Lara so slight, childish even, in the Valentino suit he bought her for the occasion. (I got a Chanel handbag and a pair of shoes too, the real thing—I'd never had anything but imitation before.) A brute, yes, but he was a generous brute.

He worried about me, too, when they were away. It wasn't just me who was forever ringing up, whatever Tom shouted at me later: "Let her go! Let her bloody well go!" (But the word used was stronger than that.) Tom used to ring me up as well.

"OK there, Ginny? Keeping the home fires burning? Not lonely, I trust? I bet you've found a fellow in the pub and brought him back for a bit of nookie." That was his idea of a joke—as if I'd ever had anything to do with any man at all once Lara was on the way. However, Tom's question about loneliness was natural enough. Stair was a big house. Any woman on her own might have been lonely there. There were no staff living in: plenty of cleaning ladies, but they came from the village. (Tom saw to it that Lara had to do nothing around the house.) A secretary came and went. That was Eileen Farleigh, who'd been with him for years: a rather prune-faced woman who had probably hoped to marry Tom when his wife died. Then there was the Greek chauffeur, Dimitris (but Tom called him Jimmy).

Maybe the real trouble began when Tom got this idea into his head about Dimitris. When Lara didn't, how shall I put it, respond, Tom began to imagine that Lara actually preferred Dimitris! Another mad jealous notion. Dimitris was pretty enough, I'll grant you that, a pretty boy. He made a lovely pair with Lara. Sometimes they played tennis together with Tom watching.

At first Tom enjoyed that. He'd play with Lara first, then sit there by the court, sweating, not even bothering to shower first. Gazing at Lara as she played a single with Dimitris, wearing the brief white tennis dress with the pleated skirt which he loved. He'd ask for "that sexy pie-frill one." Then he just lay back there commenting on the game.

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"She is knocking you all over the court, isn't she, Jimmy? How do you like that from my gorgeous girl?" He'd shout things like that. I noticed that Dimitris never answered. But sometimes he'd suddenly hit one very hard shot which would go just a little too close to his boss, following that kind of remark. That was all. Nothing, nothing whatsoever for Tom to complain about. And Lara never let anything like that ruffle her. She just smiled.

Later Lara swam in the pool with Dimitris. To relax when it was hot. Not a stitch between them. Skinny dipping, Lara called it. (That was when Tom was away but Eileen Farleigh must have reported it: a troublemaker, the secretary, from the first; jealous of Lara for being so pretty, and yes, so young.) Two children together: Lara and Dimitris. It was all so innocent.

But Tom couldn't believe it. He wouldn't. To the coarse, all things are coarse. When Lara stopped wanting to travel with him it was because she found it tiring, and frankly business trips, however luxurious, are rather dull for a young woman, aren't they? Nothing to do with me in the first place and nothing to do with Dimitris after that.

So Tom got rid of Dimitris. Couldn't handle it so he sacked him, the beautiful young man. Couldn't stand the competition. The handsome young body being compared to his own. There was an idea that Lara kept in touch with him; I'll never know the truth about that now. If she did, it was probably just kindness, worrying about him. Nothing more to it than that. As for the crazy jealousy, at first Lara just ignored it all. The smile, the famous smile, came in handy. The more she didn't answer, didn't fight back—how could she? She had no weapons—the angrier he got.

"I'll wipe the fucking smile off your angelic face." The fucking smile. I've said it now. Not so bad perhaps—so many people talk like that nowadays—but you should have seen his face, the eyeballs bulging, the hands, the forearms knotted. "You and your Mummie, the pair of you, scheming icy bitches." And obscenities followed. A great many of them. "As for Jimmy," he used to rant on, "if I hear that he's been back here again. Sneaking around . . ." More of that frightful language.

"Tom, Tom," I'd say sweetly. "Sticks and stones can break my bones but calling names can't hurt me." Then I'd go quietly to bed, hating to leave her—"Don't go, Mummie," she'd say, or maybe, "Don't go, Darling." But I did go, knowing that my remaining there just made it worse.

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After all, my room, my little room wasn't so far away: within earshot. You see, I soon left the separate flat: Lara saw I felt cut off and lonely. She tried to help me to bear it; even suggested that Tom should let me have one of his guns. (He was a gun freak, well, he would be, wouldn't he? It went with all the dreadful masculinity. And the violence.) All the same, gun or no gun, I felt happier once I was installed in my little nearby room. That way I could protect Lara.

That's how it came about that I heard the row, the bad one, the terrible one, the one that finally wiped the smile off my Lara's face.

It began as usual with the shouting. Something to do with Dimitris maybe: Tom had an idea that Dimitris had been seen hanging about the house when Tom was off in Switzerland. But sooner or later he got off the subject of Dimitris. By the way, if Dimitris did sometimes come back, in spite of being forbidden by Tom, as Eileen Farleigh testified later, he only did so to collect a few things. Even Eileen knew that he wasn't there that night—it turned out Dimitris was miles away, drinking in some pub or other (he did like his drink—but then he was a Greek, as Lara pointed out, and used to a hot climate). There were just the three of us in the house that night, Lara, Tom, and me. And soon Tom was back to the same old theme. How cold Lara was to him. Hot shouts about coldness. After that he began to beat her up. I heard the sounds, her cries.

I swear it. They said they didn't find marks, except the marks where he clutched her on her wrists (my Lara always bruised easily). But I'm quite sure that when I rushed out, he was really hitting her. Even if it hadn't quite started he would have hit her sooner or later. It was all a matter of time.

"Mummie," my Lara cried out. "Help me! He's going to kill me. Save me. You know what to do."

Tom looked at me. I had one hand behind my back.

"Oh here's Mummie," he sneered. "Mummie's feeling lonely, is she? Mummie's feeling sad. Come out of her burrow to look after her poor little girl. Well, I can tell you, Mother, this is one little girl who can look after herself. Did you train her specially to be like that? Come to think of it, who better. You grabbing ice-cold—" Obscenities followed. "Now look who's doing the grabbing," he ended.

Then he put his hand, his big dark hairy hand, on her breast. She was panting in the thin silk shirt she wore—he loved her in silk, no bra of course. I saw his hand on her breast, and the silk moving beneath his fingers.

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"Mummie," screamed Lara. "Do it." Then I took the gun from behind my back, the gun Lara had got Tom to give me.

Afterwards she told them that she tried to take the gun away from me, but that wasn't true. It happened as I've said. Lara looked at me and said for the third time: "Go on, Mummie, do it." Then she added an odd thing. I've never forgotten it. "Make me free," said my Lara. And for the first time the curve, the gentle upward curve I loved, was gone from her mouth. She looked hard, determined, a woman. My baby was gone. And I did it for her. I made her free.

I shot Tom Barney as he stood there, so his blood splashed on her clean silk shirt, soiling it, before he keeled over and fell heavily at her feet.

The people who put me here, all of them, the judge, the jury, the lawyers, all wanted to establish that I did it out of jealousy. My own lawyer talked a lot about a jealous impulse, that sort of thing. Said that if I could make out I acted in a sudden fit of jealous anger, it would go down better in front of the judge. But what did he know about mothers? He didn't even have any children of his own, I asked him. He could never understand that I did it to make her free. As she begged me.

It wasn't my impulse. It was hers, Lara's.

And now my Lara is gone from me, won't speak to me, won't even come and visit me in prison. She said terrible things about me at the trial—well, I expect her lawyers made her do that. How I'd ruined her life with my demands! How she'd tried to help me, after my unhappy life (and her unhappy childhood) and Tom too had tried to help me. How in the end I determined to come between them, and in my mad jealousy—because I couldn't do that, and Lara really loved Tom—I killed him. I never betrayed her, not even when she married Dimitris. I had to read about that in the newspaper: Lara never told me, never sent me a message. But still I never betrayed her.

I can bear prison. My whole life has been a prison, in a way, with just my love for Lara like a bright window. But how can I bear life without her? I think of my Lara, and the gentle upward curve her lips once had, and I weep.

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The mystery surrounding the death in 1560 of Amy Robsart Dudley, wife of Elizabeth I's horsemaster Robert Dudley, has never been resolved except in the imagination of writers such as Miriam Grace Monfredo, for whom history provides absorbing material for the crime story. Ms. Monfredo's novel Seneca Falls Inheritance, *also a historical mystery, was published by St. Martin's Press in April. She follows up her February 1989 Department of First Stories appearance with a second beautifully executed short venture into the past . . .*

GATHER NOT THY ROSE

by MIRIAM GRACE MONFREDO

A breeze off the Thames ruffled the hemlocks bordering the stone-walled terrace; it swung the hoop frame of a lady-in-waiting's wide bell skirt, yet the lady herself stood fixed, staring down a flight of marble stairs. Sprawling over the bottom step lay Amy Robsart, wife of Robert Dudley, mistress of Cumnor Place, Oxfordshire. Late mistress. The young woman's head was twisted grotesquely above a once graceful neck, her body had crumpled like a marionette come unstrung.

Lady Margaret drew in her breath sharply, thinking of a plaything carelessly tossed aside.

With shaking hands she lifted her skirts to make her way down the stairs, stepping gingerly over a silk slipper, lost halfway. At the bottom, Margaret stood beside her mistress, gazing at the tumbled hair sprinkled with yew and hemlock needles, stripped from boughs overhanging the steps. A small, bare branch was still clutched in the curled fingers.

Margaret sighed and raised her eyes over the manor-house rose gardens, which her mistress had loved, to a darkening twilight sky.

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It was almost over, this late summer day in the year of our Lord, 1560. And the servants would soon be returning from Abingdon Fair, where the mistress herself had sent them. Well, let *them* discover her. Raise the cry that would echo throughout all of England.

Margaret kneeled over the woman, searching through folds of silken gown; her hand closed around a roll of vellum. Standing upright again, she glanced about quickly, then slipped the note inside her own sleeve. She would go back inside, stoke the fire. And wait.

Some minutes later Margaret sat shivering on a stool before the hearth; the flames furling around beechwood logs had not yet warmed the withdrawing room. Flanders tapestries, covering tawny ironstone walls, gave off a musty odor of damp wool. The tapestry over the fireplace had woven in it a small brown doe trapped by hunters, their arrows glinting with metallic thread. Margaret's spare frame shuddered and she wrapped her arms tightly around herself. Her memory slipped back to three days past. It seemed one hundred years ago.

Like a brilliant pendant, the moon had hung over the manor house: Margaret could even pick out, in a field beyond, the flecks that were tough little Cotswold sheep. Clouds above Oxfordshire's hills swelled, creamy as court-ladies' breasts spilling over whalebone corsets. Margaret's lips tightened; she straightened the high-collared bodice of her cambric gown. Concealed by yews that thrust against the manor walls, she ran her hands briskly up and down her arms, then drew her thin mantle of wool closely around herself. The only sound was a mill wheel creaking farther down the Thames.

Hoofbeats pounded the cobblestone drive. A horse whinnied, and Margaret took a step forward, better to see Amy Robsart dart from the courtyard to meet a grey stallion and rider.

Margaret daubed her eyes, which watered in the chill of near frost. Had the sleeves of her mistress's cloak not been edged in ermine, she might have missed the exchange. A flash of white fur, the chink of a coin pouch tossed and caught, the rustle of parchment disappearing into a sleeve. That was all. No words passed. The stallion reared, pawing the sky, its thighs broader than her mistress's waist. The horse and rider galloped east toward London, disappearing at last beyond the massive oaks lining the drive of Cumnor Place. Slowly, the hoofbeats ebbed.

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Satisfied that her mistress was in no danger, Margaret sheathed the dagger she had gripped, and made her way around the yews to the courtyard. Her shadow loomed in the flicker of torchlight, dwarfing the woman who stood before the gate with eyes cast downward. Cobblestones crunched under Margaret's feet.

Amy Robsart whirled around. "Margaret?" she whispered. "Margaret, is it you?"

"It is, Milady. Breathe easy now."

The young woman inclined her head to rest it briefly against Margaret's shoulder. Then she tugged the parchment from her sleeve and sighed. "Now I shall have the truth. For good or ill, Margaret, at least I will know. If the rumors are false, then I can rest. If they be true . . ."

"First inside, Milady, before we catch our death of cold. There'll be time enough, after I stir the fire."

Margaret recognized the strong, round script of her niece Kat's hand. Kat Ashley who presided over Her Majesty's royal bedchamber. Who had stood in lieu of mother to the newly crowned Elizabeth since childhood.

Logs hissed in the fireplace. Amy Robsart sank into cushions on a bench, slumped against the back rail, and unrolled the parchment. Margaret lowered herself to a stool at her mistress's feet.

"To the Mistress Dudley," Amy began softly. "Milady, I pen this from the palace at Whitehall, on the fifth day of September, because my aunt Margaret has bid me give answer to the questions concerning your husband, Robert Dudley. This is a most delicate matter, Milady.

"You inquire as to Her Majesty's well-being. Since the coronation, the Queen has been surrounded by suitors who vie for her attention. Worry over Her Majesty's health, which has never been strong, increases the longer she delays in choosing a husband and settling the succession. And Her Majesty seems melancholy, not at all herself; the court physicians bled her from the foot and arm in June, though why I cannot say. But I assure you the court rumours that the Queen is with child are false.

"As to the other rumours which have so distressed you, Milady, I can only say that I have entreated Her Majesty to put a stop to them by quickly taking a suitable husband."

Here Amy's voice faltered. She let go the letter and lifted her hands to her face, her eyes hidden by a veil of fine brown hair.

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Margaret reached for the letter, which had dropped to a woven foot-cloth. Her eyes swept it rapidly; again she blessed her father, a Protestant clergyman, who had insisted she learn to read. As she guessed, her niece implied nothing that was not already known by all the court. By all of Europe. That while Elizabeth sported, riding to hunt with her horsemaster Dudley, the affairs of England waited. And tongues wagged; not only English tongues, but Scot and French and Spanish. All had suitors at court. All were kept at bay by a Queen whose horsemaster was said to have access to her private chambers.

Kat had been circumspect, but Margaret could read between the lines. And Amy Robsart Dudley, for all her naiveté, was not stupid: she had seen, as had Margaret, the headstrong Elizabeth riding in a flamboyant gold-covered litter on the way to her Westminster coronation. The January morning had been bleak; as Elizabeth was carried through cheering London streets, the clouds suddenly lifted. The sun streamed down. There were those who said the new Queen had commanded it. As she had commanded that her horsemaster Dudley ride at the head of the royal procession.

That a man so handsome, so versed in charm as Dudley—a man who early in their marriage could make the sheltered Amy gasp with pleasure behind the bedchamber curtains—that he would remain merely this imprudent Queen's horsemaster was unlikely. Just as it was unlikely that the ambitious Robert Dudley was riding only Her Majesty's horses.

Margaret became aware that Amy had lifted her face from her hands and was watching her. She felt a tremor run down her spine; her mistress's dark eyes were dry. The eyes Margaret had expected to be red and weeping, which had indeed been weeping for months, were instead glowing. They burned in her lovely face from a fire whose source Margaret could not begin to guess.

Amy abruptly stood and began to pace before the hearth. She twisted and untwisted her hands, wove them together again, while nodding her head as though agreeing with some inner wisdom. "So they are lovers," she said finally. "My Robert and the Queen are lovers, and all Europe knows . . ."

"Milady," Margaret interrupted gently, "the Queen and your husband were childhood companions. My niece does not say they are now lovers—"

"Oh, she didn't have to! What is more the point, Margaret, she didn't say they were *not*. Well, I wanted the truth. Now I have it."

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She stopped pacing. Her eyes widened, gleamed with an expression Margaret could not read. "They want me dead. Robert and the Queen. That's why—"

"Milady! Surely not." Margaret got to her feet and reached for her mistress's shoulder.

Amy jerked her shoulder away. "Yes," she whispered. Her face was ashen, only the eyes burning. "That is why the last time Robert was here, I became so ill. He tried to poison me, but put out the story that I wanted to take my own life. Don't you see, Margaret?"

Margaret gaped at her mistress. It was not possible. Even Dudley would not dare murder. That he wanted to wed Elizabeth, rule her and so England, Margaret had no doubt. His father, the Duke of Northumberland, had been executed when conspiring for power seven years before, during Queen Mary's reign. Bloody Mary. Elizabeth's half-sister by their father Henry's first wife, the Papist Catherine of Aragon.

Margaret's heart thudded, recalling the fear, the danger, of those terrible years. She clenched her hands, squeezed them until her fingers ached, trying to dispel the memory.

With effort, she brought herself back to her mistress. To be rid of Amy, for the Queen and for power, would Robert Dudley kill his wife? Not possible! The scandal would destroy not only him—but the Queen as well. He *must* know that.

Amy began to pace anew. Back and forth, back and forth, more and more swiftly across the floor. Color flooded her cheeks as she rubbed them fiercely with her knuckles. She reminded Margaret of a caged beast, clawing its own fur. This was not the gentle mistress she had served for ten years. This was a wild thing. Margaret again felt the tremor. Had her mistress, by abandonment and humiliation and now unreasoning fear for her life, been pushed over the edge into madness?

Yet *was* Amy's fear unreasonable? Dudley had enemies. Formidable enemies, who feared his favor with the Queen. Could they be plotting his young wife's death, with the intention of placing the blame on Dudley? On the Queen? And Amy truly had been ill. Vomiting, retching for twelve hours. At the time, Margaret had put it down to nervous vapours, concern over the rumours from London. But what if . . . ?

Margaret caught her breath. Within the past months, two new servants had been hired: a farrier and—a kitchen maid. Robert Dudley had done the hiring. Still, what if the maid had been directed to

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Cumnor Place by traitors? Margaret told herself she would dismiss the maid immediately, prepare her mistress's food with her own hands.

Amy was still pacing, now muttering softly. "She will not have him. No. I must find a way. A way to bring them both down before God and the world . . ."

"Milady, please. You need to rest. Please, come to bed . . ." Margaret cautiously took hold of her mistress's arm. Meeting no resistance, she guided the distraught woman toward the sleeping chamber.

For three days, Margaret watched her mistress pace the chamber. Amy never slept. Wringing her hands, her face feverish, she sought a plan, charging Margaret with secrecy. The other servants whispered among themselves and stayed away from the chamber door. Only the groundskeeper dared knock, bearing bouquets of late summer roses for his mistress. Roses first brought west to England from the land of the Crusades, long before the Tudors' ascendency. Roses coaxed to bloom far beyond their season: Damask pinks, Moss and white Ayrshire, the Alba of York, the red Gallica of Lancaster. Their perfume scented the chamber. The mistress paced.

On the morning of the eighth day of September, when Margaret entered the inner bedchamber, Amy was propped against cushions beneath sheets and a down coverlet the white of virgin snow. Margaret saw with relief the pale face, the quiet hands, the calm eyes of her mistress.

"Margaret, I want you to give the servants leave to go to Abingdon Fair." This said with the mistress's customary sweet voice.

"All of them, Milady? Surely not the farrier, who has a score of horses to shoe . . ."

"*All* of them," her mistress said, the voice less sweet. "Save of course yourself."

Margaret felt a sudden prick of uneasiness, as from a thorn hidden inside her lady's good temper.

With the servants gone, the mistress Dudley emerged at last from her chamber. Margaret brushed the fine hair until it shone through its silver-threaded net caul like ripe chestnuts. Then, gowned in black silk, train sweeping behind her, Amy drifted slowly through the chambers of the manor house. She stroked each drowsing cat, touched each treasured object with loving fingers. She sat before the fire and plucked her pear-shaped lute; humming a simple French

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air, popular at court, a smile wandering over her face. Almost Margaret could believe that all was well. Almost.

The day was warm, sunny, the sky a stained-glass blue. Autumn must wait. In late afternoon after napping in her chamber, her mistress bid Margaret accompany her for a stroll through the gardens. So she said. But when they stepped to the terrace, she caught Margaret's arm and faced her. Margaret saw eyes that burned again with the fire of three days past.

"I have done it, Margaret," she said, her voice a low whisper. She glanced about furtively, though they were alone. "I have made a plan. A plan of such cunning you will scarce believe it."

Margaret tried to pull away; her mistress's fingers gripped her wrist like iron tongs. "No, Margaret, you must help me now. I have done the rest, it is only to finish I need you."

"Milady, please . . ."

"It is too late to protest." Amy Robsart's voice became impatient. Defiant. "I have taken hemlock root. I shall die very soon . . ."

Margaret grabbed the hand that held her, wrenching it away. She couldn't speak, could barely breathe, and she stepped backward. Her mistress seemed not to notice and leaned toward Margaret, her tone conspiratorial. "Listen to me, Margaret. The poison will take yet some time to work. And no one will blame you—I have written a note, you see. A note that will exact from Robert his comely neck, and from the Queen her throne."

From inside a puffed sleeve, she withdrew a rolled leaf of vellum. "Here I have written that my husband and the Queen have plotted against me—"

"Milady! Milady, you cannot do this." Margaret heard her own voice as if from far away. This was mad. Elizabeth *would* lose the throne, perhaps her life, if the mistress's vengeance was successful.

"I cannot do this?" Amy's eyes shone. "I have done it. I have here written," she waved the note in Margaret's face, "that with only a short time left, I found the strength to name my assassins. The Queen. My husband. I drank the cordial that Robert brought me last visit from London. Cordial from the palace wine cellars. Cordial poisoned by—"

"Your husband brought no cordial from London," Margaret cried, knowing this could not be vouchsafed by any but herself.

Amy's lips rounded in a wily smile. "Who is to say? After all, hemlocks," she gestured toward those along the terrace, "grow everywhere."

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Still smiling, Amy tucked the note back in her sleeve and turned toward the stairs. "You couldn't know, dear Margaret, that I dug the root last night while you slept. No one will blame you . . ."

"Mistress Dudley— Wait!" Margaret's tongue felt thick, the words sticking in her throat. "I cannot let her enemies believe the Queen had a hand in this."

"Oh, it matters not what you do." Amy waved her dismissal airily. "People will believe what they want, true or no. And Elizabeth's enemies will make them believe it *is* true."

"Milady—"

"No more, Margaret!" Amy spun to face her, the black silken train following like a shadow. "I go now to my rose gardens. The groundskeeper said there is but one bloom left—on the very bush Robert gave me for our betrothal day. I will pluck it from that bush, smell its perfume once more. And that is how I will be found: with the crimson-and-white Tudor rose clasped to my breast.

"What *you* must do, Margaret, is tell all who will listen from whence the rose came."

Margaret had no words. Amy began to walk toward the marble steps. Unable to do other than watch, Margaret saw in that instant more than her mistress's madness. She saw her father's agonized face as flames consumed him; him and three hundred others burned at the stake by Mary Tudor. With Elizabeth the persecution had ceased. But now Margaret saw Elizabeth's throne empty, awaiting her likely successor, Mary of Scotland. Another Papist. Margaret saw her brothers, those two who had escaped the first Mary, pursued, tortured, and burned. And her niece Kat. Kat's children.

Margaret felt herself moving, propelled forward, though her limbs were numb. No, Milady. Gather not thy rose.

Amy paused at the top of the stairs, half-turned to Margaret behind her, and smiled. Then she turned back and stepped off. Margaret lunged forward, caught the train under her slipper, and held it down. Just long enough for Amy Robsart Dudley to sway, totter, and begin a headlong plunge down the marble stairs.

The withdrawing room had grown warm. Margaret stirred on the stool before the leaping blue flames, brought back to the present by the sound of horses' hooves, wagon wheels rumbling. The servants returning from the fair. She glanced about her. All that she had speculated in this same room while with her mistress three days past, others would now speculate. If foul play should be suspected,

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there were many suspects. But who would guess at poison in a woman who had simply fallen down stairs? The mystery of Amy Robsart's death, if it was believed to *be* a mystery, would not be solved.

Margaret's lips curved. There might always be doubt, however, and Robert Dudley would never be free of suspicion; could never wed Elizabeth. Amy had at least succeeded in that.

There were the first frantic shouts from outside: the servants had found their mistress. Margaret leaned forward and carefully thrust the note into the fire. The flames caught it. It flared briefly before it curled like a petal, and blackened to ash.

For Rachel

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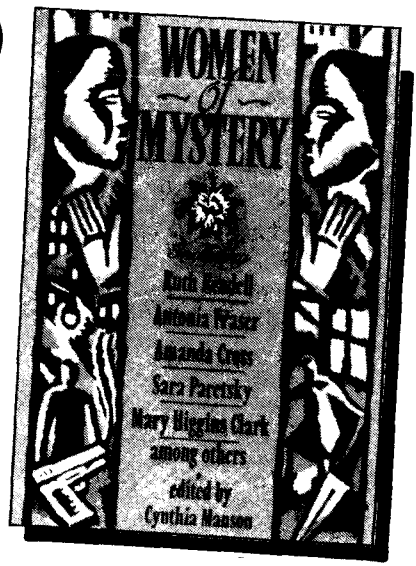
TOP WHODUNITS BY THE TOP WOMEN IN THE FIELD



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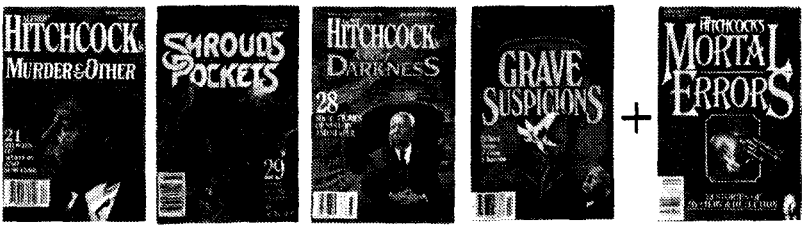

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EDWARD D. HOCH

A departure from his usual work, this memorable character study by Edward D. Hoch, which appeared in the literary quarterly Crosscurrents *last year, probes, primarily, not the motivation of the killer, but that of the detective, and of his wife . . .*

THE DETECTIVE'S WIFE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

When they were first married, before she realized what it would be like having a police detective for a husband, Jenny used to kid with him about his cases. Sometimes when he got home early enough for dinner he'd entertain her with accounts of the latest felonies around town. Most cases were solved by the testimony of eyewitnesses or the tips of informers, but once in a while there was the storybook crime that demanded a certain skill in the science of deduction.

It was these cases, especially, that Roger liked to explore with Jenny. He would go over the facts in careful detail; presenting what clues they'd been able to uncover, giving a brief account of suspects' testimony and alibis, if there were any. Then, invariably, he would look at her and say, "You know my methods, Watson. Who is the guilty party?"

She almost never came up with the correct solution, but that didn't seem to matter. It was a game both of them enjoyed. She was Watson to his Holmes, and "You know my methods, Watson" became their own private joke. Once when he spoke the line in bed during their lovemaking, she broke into a fit of giggles.

That was in the early years, when life was simpler for them both. As they passed into their thirties, still childless, something changed.

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"There's just more crime these days," Roger told her when she questioned him about his late hours.

"You never tell me about your cases any more."

He sighed and turned away. "What's there to tell about a drug dealer who gets cut up by an Uzi? It's the same thing every day, and I get tired of talking about it."

His words made sense, she knew. Other cops, friends of theirs, had gotten burnt out. It could happen to Roger too.

But there was more. The sex between them wasn't as good or as spontaneous as it had been during those first years. Sometimes she wondered if he had found someone else. She made a special effort to interest herself in his cases, and to act as his Watson once more.

"They can't all be drug killings, Roger," she argued one night. "Tell me something interesting."

"A bartender shot to death on the west side? Is that interesting?"

"Any motive?"

"Robbery, I suppose. It was after closing time, when he was alone. The cash register wasn't touched but something might have scared the killer away. Or maybe there was another motive. Some seventeen-year-old kid he refused to serve goes home and gets his father's gun. The victim must have let the killer in, so he probably knew him."

That was in February, during the eighth year of their marriage.

Jenny worked in the production department of a small advertising agency downtown. Sometimes she had lunch with the other women in the office, but more often she ate a sandwich at her desk. Occasionally, if the weather was nice, she'd venture out on a summer's day to eat her sandwich in a little park across the street where the local utility company sponsored jazz concerts on Fridays. It was here that one of the agency's artists, a bearded young man named Carl, found her on a hot August afternoon. She'd heard he was leaving soon for a better job.

"How you doing, Jenny girl? Enjoying the music?"

"It's a break from the office," she told him with a smile. "I can just take so much of ordering typesetting and engravings and printing."

He sat down beside her on the smooth stone seat. "How's hubby?"

"Roger is fine," she answered defensively. The people at work, especially the men, seemed to treat him with thinly veiled disdain because of his position with the police.

"He catch any bad guys lately?"

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"A drug dealer who—"

"What about the serial killer?" Carl asked, unwrapping a candy bar and starting to munch on it. "The one who's been shooting the bartenders."

It was true that three bartenders had been slain since February, at roughly two-month intervals. One paper had spoken of a serial killer, and there was a fear that August might bring a fourth killing. She'd spoken of it to Roger once or twice, but he preferred talking about the small everyday triumphs of his job. "I don't think he's working on that," she answered, though she knew he was in charge of it.

"That's the trouble with cops." He took a bite of his Mr. Smiley Nut Cluster. "They waste their time on unimportant crimes while the big stuff gets by them."

She suddenly felt the need to defend her husband. "Roger says most crimes are solved by informers. Sometimes a serial killer acts alone. No one else knows about it, so no one can inform on him."

Carl finished his candy bar and leaned back, letting the music wash over him. Jenny recognized it as an old Duke Ellington tune, one that her father had liked to play when she was growing up. "I'll have to meet Roger sometime," Carl commented. "Why don't you ever bring him around to the office parties?"

"He works a lot of nights," she answered lamely. The truth of the matter was that she tried to keep her two lives separate. Roger wouldn't like the people she worked with, and they would have little respect for him. Many of them were artistic types, who wore torn jeans to work and thought of the police as right-wing oppressors.

"Yeah," Carl said, getting to his feet. "Well, I'll see you back at the office, Jenny girl. Hope you're coming to my party."

She watched him cross the little park and enter the side door of their building. He'd left the crumpled candy wrapper on the ground by their bench, twisted into a knot.

Roger was moody all through dinner that night. He picked at his food and didn't say much. She tried to ask him about the day's routine, about any new crimes, but he had nothing to contribute. Finally, over coffee, he said, "I was driving around downtown this noon. I passed your building."

"Oh? You should have stopped to see me. We could have had lunch together."

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"I did see you, in that little park where they have the jazz concerts. You were with another man."

She had to laugh at this evidence of his jealousy. "That was just Carl, one of our artists. I don't take him too seriously—you shouldn't either."

"When I saw you from the car you looked like you were enjoying each other."

She could see he wasn't joking and this annoyed her. "If he bothers you, take heart. He's leaving in two weeks. He's found a better job in the art department at a printer."

"I was just *asking,* for God's sake!"

"What's happening to you? What's happening to *us?* You used to talk about your job, about the cases you worked on. You made it sound like fun, like a game!"

"It isn't a game anymore. After so many bodies it stops being a game."

Jenny tried to soothe him. "I just remember how you used to describe a case and give me the clues and let me try to solve it. You called me Watson."

"Yeah, I guess I did." He smiled at the memory.

A few nights later Roger surprised her with his suddenly buoyant spirits. He suggested they go out to dinner and took her to a neighborhood restaurant they'd frequented when they were first married. "I cracked a case today," he told her over drinks. "An interesting one I've been working on all week."

She knew he was going to tell her about it, and she felt a glow of anticipation. It was almost like the old days. "Do you have pictures?" she asked, remembering the large manila envelope he'd brought home earlier.

"Not before dinner. I'll show you back at the house."

"Tell me about it, at least."

"A man reported that his wife had committed suicide, hanged herself from a rafter in the garage."

"Did she leave a note?"

"No, which is one of the reasons we started investigating."

"What was the other reason?"

"Well, her car was outside in the driveway. Death by carbon monoxide is a lot tidier than hanging."

Their food arrived and the conversation shifted to pleasanter topics. She talked about the office, and some of the ad campaigns they were working on. It was the most pleasant dinner they'd enjoyed in

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months. Home was within walking distance, and the few blocks' stroll on a late summer evening was invigorating. The cool air against Jenny's face reminded her of the coming of autumn.

Back at the house he showed her the eight-by-ten glossies he'd brought home from the office file. Crime scene photographs were usually in color now, and she was thankful at least that there'd been no blood. The woman's stockinged feet dangled about two feet from the floor, next to an overturned crate of rough wood. "She climbed up on that and put the rope around her neck?"

"Apparently," Roger said with a slight smile. "Come on—you know my methods, Watson."

"First of all, the crate is too flimsy. I can see she's a good-sized woman. More important, in this shot of her from the rear, showing the bottoms of her feet, there are no snags in her stockings. She couldn't have climbed up on that flimsy crate in her stocking feet, adjusted the rope, and then kicked it away, all without getting a run or at least a snag from those wood splinters."

"Go to the head of the class! That's basically what I told her husband, and we had a confession within an hour."

"I'm glad," she whispered into his ear. She was glad he'd caught a murderer and glad he was back to the same old Roger she loved so much.

That night the serial killer struck again.

The following evening he was worse than ever. "I told you the games were over and I meant it! My job's on the line now. Four killings of bartenders since February is too much for the city fathers to sit still for. If we don't make quick progress they're taking me off the case, and that means I can say goodbye to any chance of promotion. I'll be lucky if I'm not back giving traffic tickets."

"I didn't see the papers. Tell me about it. Was it like the others, in a restaurant?"

"This one was different. He was shot on his way home from work, around three in the morning. The killer apparently was waiting in an alley next to his apartment house."

"But he was a bartender?"

Roger nodded. "He was helping out at the Platt Street Bowling Lanes. Before that he worked at Max's Party House, the same place as victim number two."

"That might be a lead. Maybe they owed gambling debts to one of the customers. Or maybe someone owed them money. Maybe they were dealing drugs on the side."

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"We checked all that out on the others. We'll try again but it doesn't look promising. The latest victim was a fill-in bartender. Even when he worked at Max's it was only when they needed extra people for a big party. Victims two and four probably met, but they hardly knew each other, as near as we can tell."

"How about the other victims?"

"No connection."

"And it wasn't robbery?"

"His wallet wasn't touched."

"Could it be just a coincidence?"

Roger shook his head. "Ballistics says it was the same gun all four times—a nine-millimeter automatic pistol."

He was glum for the rest of the night, and she could do nothing to shake him out of it. Finally she asked, "Did they give you any sort of deadline?"

"A week or two. They want some action."

"Maybe I can help."

He only sighed and walked away. As he'd told her earlier, the games were over.

Roger didn't attend the office farewell party for Carl. She hadn't really expected that he would, and when she mentioned it he didn't even bother to reply. Most nights she ate alone, knowing it would be nine or ten or later before she saw him. She'd never thought it would be like this, being married to a detective.

The party, at one of downtown's fancier hotels, was a welcome relief. Carl himself hadn't had a drink in two years, since his wife was killed in an auto accident, but that didn't stop the rest of the staff from having a good time. Jenny's boss, the production manager, was a beefy man named Herb who imagined every young woman in the office to be fair game, married or not. At one point he had her pressed into a corner, but he was already too far gone to be a real threat. It was the president of the agency who suggested a bit later that perhaps Jenny could drive Herb home.

"He can't drive himself and I don't want another accident, Jenny. If I help you get him into the car, could you take him home? It's less than a mile away."

"Certainly, Mr. Miller." She dreaded the idea, but she could hardly suggest that he call a cab for Herb. Miller didn't like anyone to know about drunken employees.

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It wasn't till they were on the way that she remembered she hadn't even said goodbye to Carl.

Herb mumbled and snored all the way home, but he came awake as she brought the car to a stop in front of his apartment building, and tried to make a pass without fully realizing who she was. She brushed his hand from her breast and he reached into his pocket for a handkerchief, pulling matches, gum, and keys with it.

Jenny ran around to the passenger door and helped him out, retrieving his keys and whatever else she could find. The doorman at the building took charge then, betraying no surprise. Perhaps he'd seen Herb in this condition before.

When she got back to her own house, Roger was in the kitchen preparing a sandwich for himself. "I forgot you were going to be out tonight. How was the party?"

She shrugged, dropped her keys on the table. "The usual. My boss got drunk and I had to drive him home. How's the case coming?"

"It's not. Four murders now and we're no closer to an arrest than we were after the first one. My time is running out. The commissioner wants action before the November election."

"Won't you let me work on it with you?" she asked. "Bring home some of the pictures for me to look at. Remember, I spotted the clue in that hanging case right away."

"There's nothing in the pictures," he insisted. "I've been over them a dozen times."

The following morning she found an excuse to leave the office and do some library research. While there she checked the microfilmed copies of the daily papers and read about each of the earlier killings. There was nothing new, nothing to connect the four men except their occupation. The second victim had worked exclusively at Max's Party House but the others had moved around, mostly filling in part-time at neighborhood places. The first victim had been the youngest, at twenty-six. The other three were all in their thirties or forties. They lived in different parts of the city and seemed to have been nothing more than passing acquaintances, if that much. Only one had been married at the time of his death. Two of the others were divorced. The youngest victim had never been married.

Was it a random thing, she wondered, just killing bartenders? Or had these four been chosen for a reason?

That night Roger seemed more depressed than ever. He'd brought home some of the crime-scene photographs but he never took them out of the envelope. He'd spent the entire day interviewing the girl-

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friends and ex-wives of the victims and had nothing to show for it. "No girls in common, no jealous lovers."

Finally, just before bedtime, she asked, "Can I look at these pictures?"

"Go ahead. I have to take them back in the morning."

Jenny opened the clasp on the envelope and pulled out a dozen pictures of the various crime scenes. Bodies, four bodies. All shot at fairly close range. The first three were in the barrooms where the men had worked, as they prepared to close up for the night. The fourth was at the mouth of an alley where the killer had waited. One photo showed the cartridge case ejected from the killer's automatic pistol, lying amidst the dirt and trash of the alley.

An empty pack of cigarettes, a torn stub from a nearby movie, the spilled remains of a half-finished container of popcorn, the knotted wrapper off a candy bar, a broken piece of brick—

She went on to the next photo, then quickly turned back to the picture of the alley pavement. Where had she seen a candy wrapper tied in a knot like that? Was it something that people often did, or was it unique?

Then she remembered. Carl had dropped his candy wrapper on the ground that day they'd been listening to the jazz concert on the lunch hour. It was the same brand, Mr. Smiley Nut Cluster, and the wrapper had been twisted and knotted in the same manner.

Of course it proved nothing.

When she slid into bed next to Roger she said, "Those pictures gave me an idea. I want to check on something tomorrow."

"I need all the help I can get. I also need your car in the morning."

"How come?"

"The brakes aren't working on mine. I'll take it in over the weekend."

"You'll have to drop me off at work."

"Can you get home on your own?"

"Sue will give me a ride."

"Fine." He rolled over and was snoring within minutes.

Jenny searched through the newspaper files for an account of the accident that had killed Carl's wife two years earlier. She'd never heard the details of it, and it had happened before she came to the agency, but something Mr. Miller said—"I don't want another accident"—made her wonder if it might have happened after an office party. It took her a long time to find it, but there it was. Carl's

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wife had been hit by a truck as she pulled out of the parking lot at Max's Party House shortly after midnight. They'd come to the party in separate cars and he was still inside when it happened. Her blood alcohol level was extremely high at the time, and no charges were placed against the truck driver.

A later article talked about the liability of a place like Max's that continued serving someone who was obviously drunk. There was talk of a lawsuit and the owner stated he was unable to determine which of the four bartenders on duty had been responsible.

Four bartenders.

Why hadn't they seen it? Why hadn't anyone seen it?

The answer to that was simple enough. They had approached the problem from the opposite direction, through the four victims. Jenny was approaching through Carl, and his dead wife, and the accident, and Max's Party House.

That had to be her next stop. Max's.

What a day for Roger to borrow her car!

Back at the office she arranged to take Sue's little Volvo. "I won't be more than an hour," she promised.

She struck it lucky at Max's Party House. Max himself was there, preparing for a big retirement dinner that evening. "Is this more about that lawsuit?" he asked when she told him what she wanted. "That whole thing was settled last January."

"The newspaper quoted you as saying there were four bartenders working the night of the accident. I want their names."

"Look, the case was settled out of court for a few thousand dollars. The husband's attorney convinced him he couldn't get any more than that. The only reason I paid anything was that she was hit driving out of our parking lot. As for the bartenders, I couldn't tell you if I wanted to. A couple of them were working off the books that night, to avoid paying taxes. It's not unusual in this business."

Jenny opened her purse and took out the list of names. "Just tell me one thing. Are these the four men?"

He glanced at it and then at her. "All right, those are the ones. A couple of them are dead now."

"You don't keep up with the papers. All four of them are dead now."

Jenny felt a rising excitement all the way home in the car with Sue. She barely heard her friend's chatter as she ran over the facts in her mind. Carl had settled the lawsuit in January, against his wishes, for a figure far less than he thought was justified. A month

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later, in February, the killings had begun, spaced two months apart in hopes no one would notice the connection right away. They had, of course, by the time of the third one, but then he only had to risk one more.

Four dead—one or more of them the ones who'd been directly responsible for his wife's tragic death. And he'd have gotten away with it if it hadn't been for that knotted candy wrapper dropped to the ground while he waited for the final victim to appear. How had he found out the identity of the four? Probably by getting friendly with the first victim and asking him in some innocent way. That helped explain how he came to be in the bar long after closing. He'd made friends with the first victim and then killed him when he'd learned the names of the other three.

"Here we are," Sue said, pulling into Jenny's driveway. "Home at last. I don't see your car. Roger must still be working."

"He's been working every night lately. Thanks, Sue."

"See you in the morning."

Jenny hurried into the house and got out of her sweaty clothes, silently rehearsing how she'd tell Roger. She slipped into her robe and switched on the television, settling down opposite it without really seeing it.

Roger was very late that night, and when he came in she could see that his mood was bad. He unbuckled his holster and tossed the gun onto a chair before he even spoke to her. "What does this mean, Jenny?" he said at last.

"What?" She tried to see what he was holding in his outstretched hand. "What is it?"

"A sealed packet containing an unused condom. I found it under the passenger seat of your car."

"I—"

"Do you have an explanation?"

Her mind was whirling. She could barely recognize this man standing before her. "Roger, let me think—!"

"Make it good—for whatever it's worth."

"My God, Roger! You can't think I was making love to someone in my car!" Then suddenly it came to her. "Herb, my boss! I told you I drove him home from the party because he was drunk. When we got to his apartment he pulled out his handkerchief and a lot of things came with it. I picked them up but I must have missed this."

"Herb, your boss. Am I supposed to believe that?"

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All at once the unfairness of his constant jealousy and suspicion moved her to a fury. "I don't give a damn what you believe!" She ripped open the top of her robe. "Here! Do you want to dust my breasts for fingerprints?"

That was when he slapped her. Hard.

Jenny slept that night curled up on the sofa, somehow protecting herself from further blows. When she awoke, just after dawn, it was raining. Roger came downstairs a little while later, and walked over to her. "I'm sorry about last night. This case has just got me down. I have to see the commissioner this morning and I've got nothing for him."

She got up, wrapping the robe around her, and started making breakfast. Later, while she was drinking her coffee, he remembered to ask, "Did you think of anything yesterday, about the killings?"

"No," she answered softly, staring straight ahead at the rain-streaked window. "Nothing at all."

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Many mystery readers prefer to read a series in sequence, allowing them to watch an author or characters develop from book to book. As some characters change and develop more than others, the careers of writers vary: some maintain a steady level of quality from the first; some start strong and to a greater or lesser degree tail off; some bounce up and down unpredictably; and some (the most satisfactory group to the constant reader) steadily improve. Robert K. Tanenbaum's books about New York Assistant District Attorney Roger "Butch" Karp, beginning with *No Lesser Plea* (1987), are in the latter category.

Tanenbaum has always been a capable writer, but his first three novels were marred by overblown screen-type violence, irrational behavior by the main characters, improbabilities of plot, and contrived scenes of *Animal House*-type comedy relief, all of which detracted from the very realistic central background and situations. Now, in his fourth Karp book, Tanenbaum has largely overcome these defects and hit his full stride.

**** Robert K. Tanenbaum: *Reversible Error,* Dutton, $20. Like the earlier novels, this is set in New York of the 1970s. Two cases are dealt with alternately, one a series of killings of drug dealers and the other the activities of a sociopathic date rapist (a type of criminal even more likely to evade prosecution then than today), one of whose crimes finally ends in murder. Karp and fiancé Marlene Ciampi, both dedicated (indeed driven) prosecutors, are fully realized characters who develop from book to book and become more interesting with each appearance. The plot is complex, involving, and beautifully worked out; the dialogue and narrative are sharp and powerful. This is strong stuff for cozy fans but perfect for readers who like them tough, uncompromising, and sometimes raunchy.

**** Marcia Muller: *Deceptions,* Mystery Scene/Pulphouse, Box 1227, Eugene, OR 97440; $4.95. The first Author's Choice Monthly from Mystery Scene Press serves as an excellent kickoff to this series of 30,000-word short story collections. There are seven tales, three about San Francisco private eye Sharon McCone, one the only short story appearance of Santa Barbara museum director Elena Olivarez (an engaging character I wish the author would return to at book-length, though the introduction implies she won't), and three non-series, including two of the best in the book, "The Time of the Wolves," a Spur-nominated western about frontier women, and "Dust to Dust," an effective ghost story. Muller is at least as fine in shorter lengths as in novels. (Both this volume and the two that follow

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are available in signed limited editions, $25 cloth and $50 leather, as well as the bargain-priced trade paperback noted.)

*** Bill Pronzini: *Stacked Deck,* Mystery Scene/Pulphouse, $4.95. This solid collection demonstrates its reliable author's versatility, the seven entries all criminous but otherwise quite different, range in date of original publication from 1967 to 1991 and in style from a *Black Mask*-style hardboiled item to a Nameless private eye story (*not,* says Pronzini, hardboiled) to a pure horror story to an impossible-crime tale about magician-detective Christopher Steele, written with Michael Kurland.

** Stuart M. Kaminsky: *Opening Shots,* Mystery Scene/Pulphouse, $4.95. Though more generous in wordage than the first two, this volume shows novelist Kaminsky less impressive at shorter lengths. The first three stories, a sixties series of puzzle stories about boy detective Pete Breedlove, are too farfetched for complete success; the two stories about Hollywood P.I. Toby Peters include the pretty good "The Man Who Shot Lewis Vance" with guest-star John Wayne, later used as the first chapter of the novel of the same name, and the fairly weak "Busted Blossoms" with guest-star D.W. Griffith. Best of the dozen entries are pastiches of Conan Doyle and Raymond Chandler.

*** Sharyn McCrumb: *Zombies of the Gene Pool,* Simon and Schuster, $18. In a delightful sequel to the Edgar-winning *Bimbos of the Death Sun* (1987), professors Marion Farley and James Owen Mega (a.k.a. science fiction novelist Jay Omega) travel to Wall Hollow, Tennessee, to attend the thirty-year reunion of a group of s.f. fans called the Lanthanides, some of whom have gone on to greater fame in the field, others of whom may or may not be dead. The cast is well-drawn, the whodunit puzzle deftly accomplished, and the writing has McCrumb's customary charm and humor.

*** Ed McBain: *Kiss,* Morrow, $17. The forty-fourth volume in the 87th Precinct series is solid medium-grade McBain, alternating a possible attempted wife-killing with the trial of the accused killer of Anthony Carella, father of 87th cop Steve. (The capture of the suspect was described in the preceding novel, *Widows* <1991>.) A minor flaw is the final surprise, which involves a little too much blatant reader manipulation—i.e., a failure to tell all at a crucial point—not to be somewhat annoying. It's the old fairness-to-the-reader question long broached about Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and revived in discussions of Scott Turow's *Presumed Innocent,* though the first-person narration in those novels made informational selectivity more palatable than when it comes from an omniscient third-person narrator.

*** Robert E. Vardeman: *The Resonance of Blood,* Avon, $4.50. Peter Thorne is a stage magician who, as a result of brain damage sustained in a near-fatal escape attempt, has developed a real talent for psy-

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chometry that makes him a valuable consultant to the San Francisco police. In his second book-length adventure, he breaks in a new assistant, exposes a phony healer, and aids the search for a serial killer who leaves only half a corpse behind. Thorne is more tortured than rewarded by his psychic ability, but Vardeman's readers will have a lot of fun, especially with a climax straight out of the action serials.

** Wayne D. Dundee: *The Brutal Ballet,* Dell, $3.99. As he's shown previously in short stories, Dundee is able to depict the professional wrestling sub-culture with both vividness and sympathy, and Illinois "blue-collar" private eye Joe Hannibal continues to be a likeable and individual sleuth, with good-old-boy attitudes leavened by surprising sensitivity. On the other hand, the book is longer than it needs to be, and the whodunit resolution disappoints on a couple of scores. Hannibal gets the solution handed him on a silver platter, and for this reader at least, his considerable physical travails aren't enough to counterbalance his mental free pass.

International Polygonics continues to offer some of the handsomest and best selected reprints of the past's great mystery writers. Among their recent publications are two adventures of Patrick Quentin's theatrical producer/sleuth Peter Duluth, *Run to Death* (first published in 1948; $5.95) and *Black Widow* (1952; $8.95), the latter a particularly fine sophisticated whodunit memorably filmed in 1954; two more of Craig Rice's classic comic mysteries about Chicago lawyer John J. Malone and his "Thin Man"-ish pals Jake and Helene Justus, *Trial by Fury* (1941; $5.95) and *The Big Midget Murders* (1942: $6.95); and the first of Edmund Crispin's witty and insistently artificial Gervase Fen mysteries, *The Case of the Gilded Fly* (first published in the U.S. as *Obsequies at Oxford* in 1945; $8.95), with a new introduction by the learned Douglas G. Greene. (All the above are paperbacks; the more expensive trade-size, the others rack-size.)

In hardback from International Polygonics (and also edited and introduced by Greene) is the second in its series of John Dickson Carr short story collections, *Merrivale, March and Murder* ($22.95), a generous volume of over 400 pages gathering both Sir Henry Merrivale short stories; all the Colonel March tales (those collected in 1940's *The Department of Queer Complaints* and two others), plus a half dozen non-series stories and a radio play. In the words of Greene's introduction, Carr "was uninterested in sleuths who can be described as 'ordinary' and in mysteries whose main attraction is that they are 'believable.' " If that prospect makes you want to cheer, the master of the locked room is your guy.

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DETECTIVERSE

SUCH THINGS WILL HAPPEN

by DOROTHY BELLE POLLACK

Virginia was shaped
Like a tub of oleo—
John fell in love
With her stock portfolio.

For, truth to tell,
Virginia was loaded.
(Good stocks and good bonds
Are never outmoded.)

John courted and wed her
In whirlwind fashion,
Proclaiming with fervor
His love and his passion.

But one day she fell
Down a steep flight of stairs,
An "accident" fatal
(Which answered his prayers).

Virginia was dead;
Her widower wept,
Then ran to the vault
Where the will was kept.

His schemes and his plans
Had come to fruition
And now he would reap
The fruits of ambition.

But plans and results
Often end in disparity:
His wife had left all
She possessed—clear to charity.

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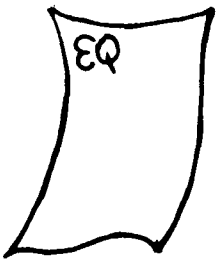
DETECTIVERSE



YOUNG LOVE

by CLAIRE KRULIKOWSKI

Why when
Jack and Jill went up the hill
to fetch a pail of water

Did
Jack fall down with broken crown
'less Jill hit him with a spanner?

You see
Jack had found a brand new Jill
'Cept this one was much fatter

Ha!
He thought it smart, a kind of lark
But Jill tumbled to the matter.

So . . .
Jack and Jill went up the hill
Each wiser than the other

But
Jill smashed his skull then tumbled down
Proving accident was the manner.

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Stephen Wasylyk, creator of a series of detective stories EQMM *published in the late seventies featuring senior citizen sleuths Mr. Morley and Mr. Bakov, returns to our pages with a new amateur detective whose wry small-town smarts make for a most engaging debut . . .*

A PINT OF REVENGE

by STEPHEN WASYLYK

Two days after Amy Bulmer was found dead, Sheriff Cashman came into my barbershop for a haircut he didn't need. He was there because he knows I'm a puzzle freak, particularly when it comes to mindbenders where you have to ignore the obvious, assemble the facts, and apply logic. It looked as though Amy's death had fallen into that category, and sooner or later he'd come up with an oblique request for help that his pride wouldn't allow him to ask for bluntly.

Putting the finishing touches on the back-to-school haircut of nine-year-old Chickie Resler, who had insisted on one of those bare sides and back, flat-top jobs he'd seen on basketball players on TV, I waved Cashman to Alfonso's chair. Cashman didn't mind. Alfonso was one of those rarities—a silent barber—and better than I was.

Looking as though he was wearing a blond powder puff atop a shaven skull, Chickie gave me a big grin, a whooped *Cool man,* and a high five as I ushered him out the door.

Two metallic blue glints in a piece of granite, Cashman's eyes were fixed on me balefully.

"When the mother shoots you for what you did to that kid's head, I'll call it justifiable homicide."

"Since you've ignored changing styles for thirty years, Cashman, I don't expect you to know what's in and what's out. That haircut is in, it's what the boy wants, and his mother hasn't said no to him since the day he was born. Found Howard Bulmer yet?"

"Your patrons checking in for the latest news?"

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"The barbershop has been the center for news and gossip since the Romans. Something wrong in that?"

"Tell the subscribers to your news network that we're still looking. Now pretend you're Alfonso and keep quiet."

I mounted my chair and waited for him to get around to asking what I knew he'd come in for, studying his reflection in the back wall mirror. A big, well-muscled man, he bulked so large in the chair that even when it was lowered as far as it could go, Silent Alfonso still had to reach up.

It didn't take Alfonso long to smooth up two weeks' growth in the dark brown crew cut. Cashman stepped down and examined his reflection critically.

"You need a new mirror. This one makes me look older and uglier every time I come in." He extended a ten. When I reached for it, he held on tightly.

"New game? We see who lets go first?" I grinned. "We'll celebrate New Year's Eve standing here."

"What have you heard?"

"The consensus is that after killing his wife, Howard is now halfway to California, but personally, I feel he's still around here somewhere."

"Maybe you'd better give some thought to the situation."

There it was, masked by the *Maybe you'd better—*

Outside, he slapped my barber pole with the rotating red and white stripes as he passed. Why people did that I had no idea. I suppose it was like touching something rare for good luck, and Cashman could certainly use a little if he was to find out who killed Amy.

"Alfonso," I said. "Hold the fort. I'm going out for coffee."

I tapped the barber pole as I passed. Who was I to defy tradition?

I strolled up the street, nodding and waving. After thirty years of clipping heads, there were few I didn't know, even from the back. The street ran straight; two-story buildings to either side. Several blocks away, the towered courthouse rose above them all; everything nestled in a fold of tree-covered hills that was still hazed slightly in spite of the morning sun. Other than the sawmill and lumber yard on the edge of town, we had nothing that could be called manufacturing or industry. Most of the people who lived here worked elsewhere.

Although we did have residents who did their patriotic best to keep our crime rate moving upward with the rest of the country's, we hadn't yet reached the point where Cashman would collapse from overwork. Amy, now, was only the third victim in a year, just a

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day's work in some of the more cultured municipalities that sneered at us for being out of touch with mainstream America.

Not a place where people ordinarily killed each other for complex and buried motives, so Cashman was looking for Howard for two very simple and basic reasons. He was Amy's husband and he'd disappeared. Those two factors had sunk many a man, but there was more.

Amy had liked talk, laughter, and a good time, none of which a perpetually sad-faced and morose Howard provided. She compensated by settling down each afternoon with a couple of six-packs while watching soap operas—unaware she was living one—after putting in her eight-to-twelve shift as checker at the town's supermarket.

That day, it appeared she'd gone home as usual to prepare lunch for Howard. Consider that Howard always drove home from his job with a law firm in the county seat rather than pay the inflated prices around the courthouse which only lawyers could afford, and that the M.E. had fixed the time of death as between twelve and one, and Howard sank a little deeper. Add to that that he'd expressed irritation many times at her beer drinking and the criminal justice system closed over his head.

Those were the obvious facts—at this point good only for gossip and speculation. If Cashman wanted more, he'd have to give me more to work with. I forgot the coffee, crossed the street, and headed for his office on the second floor of the courthouse.

I lifted a hand at Ringold, the deputy on desk duty this week. Cashman ignored me, concentrating on the paper he was reading, so I sat down and contemplated the window, which evidently hadn't been washed since the office had been used for recruiting during the Civil War.

Cashman looked up. "I know damned well you haven't turned up anything in a half hour, so I suppose you decided to play detective. Who are you this time? Holmes never wore a white smock with scissors projecting from the breast pocket."

"This is no smock. Since I always go first class, this is a smartly tailored white linen jacket. Someone said Amy had been stabbed. Someone else said she'd been strangled. Which was it?"

He flipped through several papers and handed me one. "Not for broadcast to your subscribers."

It was the M.E.'s autopsy report. As I scanned it, I felt my eyes widen. Amy had been found beaten, her arms and face covered with

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shallow cuts, a dish towel wrapped around her neck. An even bigger surprise was that while the beating, cutting, and strangulation could have resulted in death, she might have survived any or all of that if she'd received medical attention before a final knife thrust to the heart. The knife was missing.

I felt my throat muscles tighten. "You've kept this quiet."

"Want me to inflame the masses?"

"Wise move. It's inflamed me." I floated the paper back to his desk and stood up. "Not Howard's work. No way."

"That's only your opinion. Going back to the shop?"

"Been my headquarters for thinking for a long time."

He flicked a finger at Ringold. "Take him with you." His voice rose. "Not below the collar or over the ears, Ringold!"

Ringold had a flat, heavy face which he thought benefited from a mass of blond ringlets so thick he need never worry about being knocked out if hit on the head. It would require the services of a sheepshearer rather than a barber if he ever decided to get rid of it. At least a month late in having it trimmed to Cashman's standards, he lifted a casual hand. "See you at the end of the day."

I walked back to the shop. Three people were waiting.

"How was the coffee?" asked Milo Kutner as he slid into my chair.

"Good."

"Good? Give you a dollar if you tell me where you got it. I haven't found a good cup of coffee in this town yet."

My hands took over, at it so long my brain could busy itself elsewhere.

Amy had been found on the kitchen floor by Rosa Jalinsky, the neighbor from across the road, who had walked over about three o'clock to swap cents-off supermarket coupons for products she didn't want for some she did.

One look at all the blood and Rosa had fled. From the debris in the kitchen and dining room, she'd assumed that they'd belted each other all over the place, which might have been possible since neither had the advantage of height, weight, or reach; both were about five-six and Amy's beer drinking boosted her close to Howard's one hundred and fifty pounds. Rosa's justifiably fast departure explained why only the police knew what Amy had been put through before she died.

You'd think that in broad daylight, even though it had been raining, someone would have seen something, but no—Rosa had been down at the school, the other neighbors were busy one way or an-

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other, and the position of the house, up a driveway and surrounded by trees, had been no help either.

Howard had come in one evening just as I was closing up. He must have felt like talking to someone and with no one else in the shop, his slightly tinny voice droned on as I clipped.

You had to understand Amy, he said. Everything had looked great when they'd married, but then she'd lost a child and been told not to try again. He hadn't been able to get by the state law exams even though he'd tried three times, and there they were, puttering down life's highway on two cylinders while everyone else sped by. Still loved each other, even if people didn't think so, so there was no point in a divorce. He knew he wasn't a fun guy but he never had been, and feeling like Mr. Failure was hardly conducive to a change in personality.

So you pick yourself up and try again, I'd said.

That works only when you have a chance of winning, he'd said.

When Howard looked into my mirror he could see only a man in limbo, too smart for what he was doing and not smart enough to do what he wanted to do, never to be more than he was.

Rather than run away, a man like that would more likely consider arrest as another deserved burden. He might have panicked, of course, but panic doesn't last for two days. I also couldn't see him torturing Amy.

I woke up to the fact that I was finishing up on Andy Rasknov, who caught my eye in the mirror.

"What the hell's wrong with you? I've been talking at you for ten minutes and all I get is grunts."

"Alfonso is giving me silence lessons," I said.

"Well, get with it. You don't think we come in here just to get our hair cut, do you? You give the lousiest haircuts in the county but the conversation is always scintillating and provocative."

"Scintillating and provocative? I'm a barber, not a talk show host. The next thing you'll be asking for is weird guests. Get out of my chair."

Andy grinned. "All I want is the latest on the murder." He waved at the photos I'd pinned to the wall—a retrospective of my life starting with the day I'd opened the shop, my wife holding my arm, a half dozen memorable events in the lives of the kids, and several where Cashman and I had taken prizes in fishing tournaments.

"Is your buddy making any progress?"

"Still looking for Howard."

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Jess Wilkins spoke around Alfonso. "Maybe he's looking in the wrong place. Maybe Howard ditched the car and is hiding out in the woods."

"Howard? In the woods?" Andy sounded skeptical.

"Don't sell him short. One day last fall during small-game season, I found him sitting on a big flat rock next to the creek behind his house. Binoculars around his neck. Bird watching, he said. He has to know his way around the woods."

Bong! Something went off in my head, shorting out the motor circuits to my fingers briefly and causing the scissors to take too big a nip. What the hell. Andy would never see it in the back.

I finished him up and looked at the last customer, Dave Arthur.

"Got to go out. Alfonso will get you. He's a better barber anyway."

"I know," he said sadly, "but I always look forward to seeing if you've found a new way to butcher my hair."

Some of these guys think they're funnier than Carson. Also better at managing the Phils, coaching the Eagles, and running the country.

I went back to Cashman's office.

"We know Howard came home for lunch, but call the people he worked for and see if it had been on the original agenda for that day."

"What kind of stupid request is that? Don't you think they'd have told me already?"

"Not unless you asked." I waggled a finger at the phone. "You're dealing with lawyers, you know, the people who originated the idea that silence is the best policy, not honesty."

I stared at the dirty window while he made the call.

He slammed the phone down. "Now they tell me. They were expecting to spend the day in court, and when that happens they all have lunch together. But the defendant pled guilty before the trial started so everything went back to normal. Which means that his coming home was a surprise and he probably walked in on Amy playing tangle-toes with someone. Maybe you just made the case against him."

"And maybe not. Maybe he walked in on someone roughing Amy up. Look at what happened to her. She was tortured and finally stabbed, and those two rooms were trashed. Sounds as though someone was trying to get something from her, doesn't it?"

"Like what?"

"I have no idea."

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"You've been sniffing hair spray again. You're turning a simple husband-wife thing into a plot for a mystery novel. What do we find in Chapter Ten? Howard's a low-level Justice Department employee who stole a document that will send the President, the Senate, and Congress all to jail? Howard caught her and his mind went south, that's all."

"Caught her with who, or whom, as the case may be?"

"How do I know without looking into it? Only famous personalities issue bulletins on their sexual activities. I'm beginning to regret talking to you. I've seen that glazed look in your eyes while you're working. The scissors are going a mile a minute but your mind is on dancing girls in Tahiti."

"Never heard of dancing girls in Tahiti."

"Dancing girls are everywhere. Go oil your clippers."

"I think not. I'm going out to the scene of the crime."

"Look, Figaro, I asked you to think, nothing else. You go charging around and you could hand Howard's defense lawyer enough to get the case thrown out, and if that happens, the state prison gets a barber for an inmate, which will make the warden very happy."

"I'm just going for a walk in the woods."

"Someone might mistake you for a deer and shoot you."

"Be sure to ask him when he last saw a deer wearing a well-tailored white linen jacket. With scissors in the breast pocket."

The house was five miles out on a two-lane blacktop, tucked among the trees in a little valley with a half dozen others within loud shouting distance, Rosa Jalinsky's across the road more like a medium hello. It was one of those basementless, pseudo Cape Cods. The doors were sealed, but I wasn't interested in the interior. I walked around to the back yard, a fifty-foot patch hacked out of the forest. Only about fifteen feet of it had ever felt the bite of the mower, and that because of the two clothes poles which stood there.

Amy must have been one of those women who forego the automatic dryer to hang laundry outside in the mountain air and sunshine whenever possible. I looked closely at the weathered dullness of the galvanized steel hooks on the crossarms. Gleaming where the rope would be. The rope had been removed only recently.

The portion of the cleared patch that hadn't been mowed had been taken over by knee-high weeds and wildflowers. I followed a scarcely visible path down the center into the trees.

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When I reached the stream, sure enough there was a big flat rock off to one side where Jess Wilkins had seen Howard.

I'd fished every bit of flowing water in the area, so I knew that upstream was no different from what I saw here—thirty feet wide, anywhere from a foot to two deep, and studded with rocks.

Downstream, however, there was an abrupt bend where high water had curled back through the years, not only eroding the far bank but hollowing the bed to form a pool ten feet or so deep under the trees, some of which showed exposed roots and would eventually topple. Skinny-dipping kids loved to move out on a limb and drop into the pool. Always in deep shadow because the trees were on the south side, the bottom was hidden unless the water was exceptionally clear.

I hopped, skipped, and jumped across on the rocks, went down to the pool and peered in. Hadn't cleared much after the several days of rain we'd had recently. All I saw was the reflection of the trees.

Risking a charge of indecent exposure—if not hysterical laughter echoing through the woods—if anyone saw me, I stripped and in true skinny-dipping style, pinched my nostrils closed with one hand, raised the other above my head, and stepped off the bank, thinking it was amazing how far an otherwise sane barber just this side of fifty would go simply to prove a theory.

Whoosh!

Good thing there was nothing wrong with my heart. I'd forgotten how cold the water could be, having reached the age where heated pools and hot tubs were more my style. I came up, rigid with shock, gasped a deep breath and went down again. Didn't take long at all.

Howard was there in the deepest, most shadowed part, not only wrapped in the missing clothesline, but bound by it to a flat rock on his chest to be sure he didn't come up again. Luckily, the rain had kept the kids away. Would have scared the hell out of a young skinny dipper. Didn't make me feel too good either.

I found a patch of sun and stripped the water from my body to hasten drying. Several things were a great deal clearer than the water in that pool.

Amy must have told someone that Howard wouldn't be coming home for lunch, so he'd known she'd be alone. Of course, she'd be alone during the afternoon with her six-pack and soap operas, but his absence during working hours might be noted. Had to be done during the man's lunch break. He'd come up to the house from the rear to avoid being seen and in between torturing her, trashed the

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kitchen and dining room. Had to be looking for something. Running out of time, he had no choice but to kill her. Too risky to assume she'd die on her own. But surprise—Howard had driven up. The killer had probably planned leaving her there as a big mystery for Cashman, but now he could lay it all on Howard. Someone else might have given him a battle, but marching Howard to the pool, killing him, and tossing him in must have been easy. Amy probably put up a better fight. He'd had one problem, though. That pool was no Marianas trench, and knowing the water would clear eventually, he'd have had to go in and drag it to the deepest part to be sure it wasn't spotted too soon.

Getting rid of Howard had left him no time to finish his search. All he could do was run back and drive away in Howard's car, hiding it somewhere in the woods close to his own, and get back to his job, wherever it was.

Not a bad scheme on the face of it. As long as Howard was missing, Cashman had no reason to suspect or look for anyone else. Sure, the body would be discovered eventually and so would the car, but so what? Try piecing it all together weeks or months later. And even if you did, the man might be long gone.

I'd long ago given up getting angry at the injustices that life meted out, but this was a little too much. Neither Amy nor Howard had needed a third party brutally solving their problems this way. Whoever had done it would be better off in Cashman's hands than mine.

Cashman tapped the pencil point on the desk. "The knife was with the body. From the Bulmers' kitchen. We're searching for signs along the creek and for Howard's car. Damned if I know how you do it."

"What can I say? When I decided to become a barber the world lost a great detective. The big question now is, who did Amy tell that she didn't expect Howard home for lunch?"

"I have someone looking into it, which is what I should be doing instead of listening to you congratulate yourself." The pencil stopped tapping. "We searched the rest of the house and found nothing, so I called the police psychiatrist at the county seat and tried your theory on him. Possible, he said. Could well be a sadistic son of a bitch looking for something he thought she had. On the other hand, we could be dealing with a sadistic son of a bitch who had no reason at all."

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"Still can't imagine what she could have that would be so important."

"That's kinda like the question I asked. What's important to him may not mean a thing to us, he said. Anyway, he feels if that's the motive, she probably had no more idea of where it was than he did, or she'd have told him rather than suffer like that."

I shook my head. "Poor Amy. All that pain and terror without knowing why. When are you going to get that window cleaned?"

"I've submitted three hundred and sixty-five requests to maintenance but between coffee breaks and nap time, they're always too busy. Why is my dirty window suddenly bothering you, anyway?"

"If it was clean, I might be able to see where you put Amy's car."

"No, you wouldn't. All you'd see would be the roof and the air-conditioning unit for the first floor. Why do you want her car?"

"Since you searched the house and found nothing, what's left?"

We went through Amy's old two-door Pinto twice before we found what we thought the killer might have been looking for. The hump of the drive-train tunnel ran so close to the bucket seats there wasn't enough room for your fingers. There was enough room, however, for the passbook from an S & L in the county seat to slide down along the passenger's seat, hidden by the seat-belt clip and the bend, its tan sleeve almost matching the beige interior and making it even harder to spot.

She could have given him a lift, it slipped out of his pocket, he remembered having it when he got into the car, looked for it, couldn't find it, and assumed she had and was holding out. She, of course, wouldn't have had the faintest idea of what he was talking about.

Cashman extracted it with a plastic-gloved hand and flipped it open.

"Raiford Mark. Believes in steady saving. Deposited between eighty and a hundred a week for the past year. Balance more than five thousand. Ever hear of a Raiford Mark?"

"No."

He grunted. "A piece of scum killed them both for this? Why? Without the passbook, all he needed was his signature and identification to withdraw the money."

I stroked my jaw. "Banks aren't too fussy when you open an account, but they can be very touchy when you want to take your money out. He could provide the signature, but might have felt he

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was a little shaky on the identification end, which could lead to a bit of a hassle. Which would draw attention to him, something he couldn't afford."

Cashman stared at me.

"Maybe there is no Raiford Mark," I continued. "Maybe the passbook is more than a passbook. Maybe what we have here is—"

"Stop with the maybes and say what's on your mind."

"Tommy Cromwell, the bartender at the Sky Lounge, retired to a condo in Florida. Said he'd always been lucky at the Atlantic City casinos and squirreled the money away. He didn't win it in Atlantic City. He stole it from the Sky Lounge over a long period of time. He told me the last time he came in for a haircut."

"What are you, some kind of Father Confessor people tell you things? Like you can't turn them in?"

"Turning him in would have been a waste of time. Stupid to steal big, Tommy said. Steal small. Called it his retirement program. Very few businesses with a high cash flow will miss a few dollars a week, especially when the loss is consistent. Put it in a bank under a different name and false social security number, move it every couple of years using different names and addresses so the IRS can't track you down for tax on the interest. When it gets big enough, move it in and out of mutual funds the same way. Even if your employer catches you, he has no idea how long you've been at it, so all that happens is you get fired. Combine it with your legitimate savings or pension plan and social security and you have a very comfortable retirement. Steal fifty thousand at one time and they come with handcuffs."

Cashman shook his head. "You must hypnotize people sitting in that chair to make them tell you these things. I'll call the S & L for a description and tell them to freeze the account."

"He may have taken a chance and cleaned it out."

He held up the passbook. "Makes no difference as long as I have this. He can't argue with fingerprints."

"Not too many candidates if I'm right. How many businesses handle enough cash in one week not to miss the eighty or hundred the passbook shows? But you're on your own. I'd better get back before Silent Alfonso quits."

He waggled the book. "Not a word about this or what we think it means."

"After all my good work, you have no right to insult me," I said.

* * *

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Two well-tanned kids had Alfonso a little grim faced. One was bouncing around in his chair, the other in mine, and both were talking, simultaneously and loudly. Both wore T-shirts, shorts, and untied sneakers in the last stages of disintegration.

I restored peace and went to work on mine. Practicing to be a used car salesman or politician when he grew up, he tried to con me into believing he had his mother's permission for a haircut like Chickie's. Chickie's mother might not care, but at the very least, *his* mother would beat me up if her kid walked in with half his hair gone.

We finished them up and they went out, leaving enough hair behind to stuff a mattress and probably not to be seen again until a wedding or a death in the family or Thanksgiving, whichever came first.

"Pushing closing time, Alfonso. Not likely we'll get more than one or two more. You've been on your feet all day. Why don't you take off?"

He smiled, nodded, and walked out. He didn't pat the barber pole. Why should he? He was young and handsome and a good barber. He didn't need any more luck. Someday he'd be running Alfonso's Unisex Salon, with six chairs and more women than men as customers.

I sank into my chair gratefully. He'd been on his feet all day, but I hadn't been far behind. In addition to plunging into an ice-cold pool, of course, the shock probably damaging a previously healthy heart.

I'd forgotten about Ringold until he stepped in.

"Pull the shades," I said. "You're the last one today."

I tucked him in. "Cashman must have been harping at you for weeks."

His shoulders moved beneath the drape. "So the hair is a little long. So what?"

"Anything new develop over there?"

"Not since you two found the passbook. How did you figure that out?"

"Logic." I began snipping the ragged curls smooth.

He grunted. "Your logic could cost somebody a year's work."

Perhaps that plunge *had* damaged my heart. It skipped. All right, Cashman had shown him the book and he'd seen it was a year old. But that was as far as close-mouthed Cashman would have gone, particularly after saying, "*—or what we think it means,*" since at this point it might represent nothing more than diligent week-in,

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week-out savings by someone with no connection to the case at all. And why should Ringold classify those savings as *work?* With perhaps a touch of resentment in his voice?

I worked around him, my fingers on automatic.

A person handling cash wasn't the only one in a position to skim off small amounts. A cop could do it. Hell, even easier than filching from one of the local businesses. This might not be the crime capital of the world, but not all the inhabitants walked around with halos, either. Among others, we had drunk drivers, shady roadhouse owners, and a fair share of people puffing, snorting, injecting, and toting controlled substances, all of whom were fair game for a greedy opportunist. Done with a little forethought, it would take Cashman a long time to catch up to it. And then it would be difficult to do much more than fire the man. As Tommy Cromwell had said: the guy who steals big gets the headlines, the fine, and the prison sentence, while the guy who steals small laughs all the way to the bank.

"The man had to drag the body underwater to where I found it," I said, "so I told Cashman to look for someone who came back from lunch with wet hair. What do you think?"

I could feel his body tense. "Long shot. Rained that day, remember? And the man might have soaked his hair to comb it."

"Not with today's hairstyles, like yours." I was shaping one side, comb in one hand, straight razor in the other. "Any woman will tell you when you walk around with this much hair, you can't afford to get it wet unless you have a dryer and a little styling gel or hairspray handy and time to use them."

I placed my left hand on his shoulder. "Cashman's crewcut, now that would be dry in no time, but yours—"

I felt the muscles stiffen under my hand. I snapped my right around in front of his face, the blade of the razor gleaming, letting him get a good look at it before dropping it below his chin.

"Sit very still, Ringold."

He sat. A straight razor an inch from the throat will turn anyone into an instant piece of sculpture.

"Ever hear how the barber pole originated? Barbers used to practice surgery until Henry the Eighth limited them to bloodletting. Those red and white stripes represent the blood and bandages. Now if you don't want to become the last man in recorded history to suffer serious bloodletting at the hands of a barber, don't even breathe."

I took his pistol just as Cashman stepped through the door.

Face white, Ringold half rose in protest. "This guy—"

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"Shut up and sit down!" snapped Cashman. He took the pistol from me. "Nice of you to save me the trouble. How did you know?"

"He said the wrong thing at the wrong time. Money is still in the account, isn't it?"

He nodded. "Better to let it sit. If we didn't tie it to him, he could always collect it later. I suppose tellers look at only the money. You should have heard the description they gave me. Could fit half the county. But what you said about wet hair made me remember two things. The day before Amy died, I met him coming in the courthouse door from lunch. The rain had just started. Knowing how he hated to get that fleece wet, I thought it was a damned good thing he was wearing his hat. When I stepped outside, I saw Amy's Pinto pulling away. Didn't dawn on me then, but now I know she must have given him a lift."

"Which was when he lost the passbook. I wondered why she'd let him get within five feet of her." I held the razor close to his eyes and rolled it slightly, light flashing from the blade. "You scum. You really repaid her with kindness—"

He braced himself in the chair, his face white. *"Cashman—!"*

"Knock it off," said Cashman. "I don't give a damn about him, but you'll only make a mess in your shop."

I lowered the blade. "Might be worth it, but go on. Keep talking while I finish him up. No one walks out of here with half a haircut, even a piece of sadistic slime like this."

"But the day she died, he walked in from lunch looking like a drowned rat. Said he'd left his hat in the car, but the hair was a lot wetter than the uniform. Now, if he'd been on patrol instead of desk duty, he'd have had time to sneak under his hair dryer at home. For that matter, on patrol he wouldn't have had to go to her house during lunch at all. He could have stolen an hour during the afternoon. When I put those two things together with a few hints I've been getting, I knew why that passbook was so important. The DA would figure it was more trouble than it was worth to prosecute for a few bribes here and there. Save the taxpayers money by simply booting him out. But with that passbook in his hands, he'd bring out the big guns because we'd be talking major felony."

"Damn," I said admiringly. "Now that kind of analytical thinking is worthy of *me*, Cashman."

Arrogance and contempt ran through Ringold's voice. "Thinking ain't convicting."

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"Face up to it, dummy. You're gone." Cashman crooked a finger at him. "Let's go."

"Not until he pays me," I said.

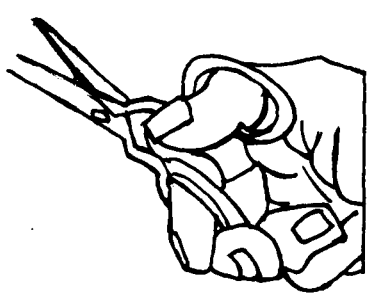
Feeling safe with Cashman there and still arrogant, Ringold chuckled. "What makes you think I'm paying?"

I tapped the bridge of his nose with the back of the blade. "Of course you are. You're the last man in the world entitled to a free haircut. Get it up or my hand slips. Nothing Cashman can do about an accident."

Eyes on the razor, he fumbled a ten out of his pocket.

Thinking of how Amy must have suffered and how terror-stricken Howard must have been, I could hear the ghosts of thousands of sixteenth-century barbers urging me to release the demons in this man by drawing blood—a lot of blood—but as a civilized man, I could never consider such an antiquated, thoroughly discredited, excessive, and drastic remedy based on medical ignorance.

But if Cashman hadn't been there, I'd have been strongly tempted to settle for a pint or so of revenge.



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a *NEW* short story by

LAWRENCE TREAT

For more than fifty years Lawrence Treat has been writing crime stories that have helped to shape the genre itself. He entertains us here with the story of a long-concealed crime, and a lifelong obsession. . . .

THE BROTHERS

by LAWRENCE TREAT

He was a loner and I first saw him sitting in a corner of the community center recreation room. He was fiddling with the pieces of a chess set, and from the very beginning I was struck by his face, narrow and gaunt, with hooded eyes and high cheekbones under which the flesh was pulled taut, leaving a kind of cicatrix. I wondered why nobody came over to him and I almost asked, but instead I walked over to his corner and said, "Care to play?"

Without answering, he held out his two fists with a pawn in each. White and black. I made my choice and sat down.

He did not smile and did not speak, except at the end of the game, which he won. He merely said, "Mate." And that was that.

In all the years during which we played almost every Tuesday at seven forty-five, he never smiled or laughed, and he seemed always to be thinking about some impending tragedy, although the tragedy had happened twenty years ago and had no further consequences, except in his own distorted mind.

I say distorted, but it was far from that. His life was organized down to the smallest detail. Chess with me every Tuesday at quarter to eight. Dinner at the community center on Friday. As I later found out, he bought chicken every Saturday, pork on Monday, and fish on Wednesday. Lemon sole, always. I suppose he got up at the same

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time every morning and ate exactly the same breakfast at the same time. And regularly, on the fourth day of every month, he went to the cemetery and put flowers on her grave.

He must have had a small income, besides a social security check, and he owned the house in which he lived. He'd been a painter, good enough to have a dealer in New York and make an occasional sale, but far from the big time. He still worked, judging by the paints and rolls of canvas he brought back from New York twice a year, but nobody had ever seen him leave his house with a painting under his arm. Not after it had happened.

People still talk about the trio, the brothers Victor and Bruce, and Evelyn, pronounced with a long *E*. They were inseparable and everybody expected her to marry one of them, but which? Victor was a painter, serious about his career, and Bruce sold insurance to practically everybody in town. He was well-liked, as easygoing as a puff of smoke, and the odds were five to three in his favor. And then one evening, sweet and clear, Evelyn's body was found lying in the grass in the small memorial park near their house. Supposedly she'd been walking her dog, a fluffy white poodle that stayed with her body and barked at everybody who came near. Investigation indicated that she'd been strangled somewhere else and carried there, but the police got no further than that.

Victor had been in nearby Fayetteville that evening, some kind of family celebration, and Bruce was away. Nobody knew where, but he'd been away. And never came back.

At first, nobody believed that Bruce could possibly have been implicated, and yet, how explain his disappearance? As for Victor, he said nothing, saw no one, and locked himself up to mourn.

After I'd settled down and come to be accepted in the town, I got various versions of the story and various points of view about the brothers. Arthur, at the filling station, smiled when I mentioned Bruce.

"One of the nicest guys I ever knew," Arthur said. "He'd do anything for you and pass it off as if it was nothing. I wonder what happened to him. A sweet guy like that."

Linda, at the Hamburger House, had a minority view. "Bruce? I dated him before Evie ever came along, and mister, I'm glad she did."

"Why? Why so bitter?"

"Behind that easygoing guy was one tough son of a bitch, so don't ask me about him or I'll get mad all over again."

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I was between books and I decided to find out as much as I could about Evie. Maybe for an article, maybe just to satisfy my own curiosity, but word got around that I was interested. Incidents began to pop up like seeds long dormant and suddenly sprouting up. People would stop to ask me if I'd discovered anything new.

As far as I could tell, the town had been about evenly divided between those who thought Bruce must have killed her (why else would he have gone away?) and those who couldn't believe Bruce was capable of crime. The two sides compromised on the theory that some bum, some transient hobo, must have happened to see Evie walking her dog in the park that night and assaulted her. But if that was the case, I asked why Bruce had disappeared. People shrugged their shoulders and said, "Chief Posner ought to know everything there is. Ask him."

I did.

It was one of those drab, depressing days when it won't rain and won't clear up, and when I came into the chief's office, he was drawing circles on the back of a sheet of pink paper labeled Form B. He had one more intersecting circle to finish before he looked up and asked me what my business was. When I stated it, his big body rocked with suppressed laughter. He slurred his answer, muffling the words the way some fat people do, too much flesh hugging the jaw muscles to enunciate clearly.

"Not my job," he said, "and not yours, either."

"Think Bruce killed her?" I said. "Because from what I hear, it would be completely out of character. He just wasn't that kind."

"Everybody's that kind," Posner said, "when they get worked up."

Logical, I suppose, but more to the point, it saved the chief and his eight-man force a lot of work. Which he readily admitted.

"This here's a small town," he said, "and we don't have the equipment to handle major crimes, so why would anybody here go out and ask a lot of questions when all they'd do is stir things up?"

"For instance?" I said. "What kinds of things?"

He took a deep, snuffling breath and he looked at me as if he was going to accuse me of larceny and homicide and every other crime in the book. Except, of course, suicide. Nobody can accuse me of that.

"Things?" he said, sloshing the word around. "Gossip, neighbor against neighbor. I like to have friendly people around me, the kind that like to sit down and play pinochle with a fat man. Do you play?"

He was evading the point, but I kept pushing. "Are you telling me that you're holding back evidence because you don't feel like investigating?"

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That was strong stuff to say to a cop, but it didn't seem to bother him. "Mister," he said, "if I had Bruce Cardigan's fingerprints, I'd send them on to Washington. But I don't."

"Okay, but tell me about Evie. What kind of a person was she?"

"Like everybody else, there were two sides to her, and maybe a lot more. Which side do you want?"

"The side you don't want to tell me about," I said.

He leaned back and let his belly quiver. "I guess you heard a lot of talk about how she could have been Miss America if she'd only tried," he said. "Well, I'm telling you she tried, only they turned her down on moral grounds."

"What kind of moral grounds?"

"Ask her," he said.

End of interview.

But word gets out. In a small town the grapevine is a better source of information than the radio, TV, and the newspapers combined, and at Sol's Bar & Grill several people asked me why I'd gone to the police and whether it had anything to do with Evie.

I gave a straightforward answer. "Yes," I said, "and all I found out is, he likes pinochle."

I thought that settled the matter until a couple of days later when I was sitting by myself and nursing a drink and Jake Bohack came and sat down opposite me. I'd seen him at the supermarket a couple of times but had never said more than hello or what kind of day it was, and I wondered why he chose now to single me out. "Kind of quiet tonight," he remarked.

"You mean nobody's talking about Evie? After twenty years, why should they?"

"I got nothing against her and nothing against the chief except he weighs too much," Jake said, "but there never was much of an investigation and I wondered why. It looked like nobody wanted to bother. Including him."

"Standard police procedure," I said. "Cops don't do any more work than they have to, and it's too late now for any real investigation, but I keep wondering, for instance, why Evie decided to walk her dog in the park that evening. First time she ever did. The question is, was she alone?"

"If she'd been alone, nobody'd be there to kill her."

"Who do you think she was with?"

"With Popo. Her dog."

"You know? You were there?"

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It was a shot in the dark but it made his hand bounce up hard enough to spill some of his beer. He studied the froth carefully, as if it were the Delphic oracle about to give him all the answers. "Walt," he said to me, putting the glass down slowly, "my sister was Evie's best friend and Evie told her things she wouldn't tell anybody else."

"For instance?"

"How do I know? My sister's dead and all I can tell you is this: Evie got fed up with waiting around for a couple of brothers to make up their minds. She couldn't stand it and she was ready to bust loose, so suppose it was just that. She went haywire with some guy and it got out of hand and he killed her."

"And she'd brought her pooch with her so it could share in the fun?"

Jake scratched his head. "Beats me," he said.

But it occurred to me that he knew much more than his sister was likely to have told him. If she was such a good friend of Evie, why tell her brother and hope he wouldn't spread the news all over town?

Sol, however, had apparently been listening to my conversation with Jake, because the next night Sol had a funny expression on his face every time he looked at me. I was sitting at one end of the bar and I figured that by and by Sol would come over and tell me what was on his mind. Therefore it was no surprise when he sidled down to where I was sitting and took a glance around the room to make sure nobody'd be yelling for another drink. Satisfied that he'd have a few minutes for himself, he leaned forward and said, as if it was something confidential, "I'm wondering what Jake said the other night."

"Not much. His sister knew Evie and Evie told her she was worried because neither Bruce nor Victor had proposed."

"Is that all? Jake's told that story to half the people in town and he changes it every week. But let me tell you this—Evie was a tough cookie and she never confided to anybody. She knew what she wanted, and she kept it strictly to herself."

"I wish I'd known her."

"You see Vic pretty regular," Sol said. "He ever talk about Evie?"

"Never. Never mentions anything personal. About all we ever do is play chess. One game, which he usually wins, and then he goes home. Or at least, I guess that's where he goes. Why?"

"I knew him pretty well before it all happened. And sometimes after a drink or two, people say more than they want to."

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"So?"

"Well, one night Vic came here, he'd had a few, at first I wasn't sure whether I ought to serve him, but he could hold his liquor and about the only effect it ever had on him was he opened up. Always been kind of close-mouthed, but he couldn't hold back the big news. He was riding high, because he was going to make a lot of money, he was going to be rich and famous."

"How come?"

"A big mural for some bank in New York."

"But it didn't come through, did it?"

"Not that I know of, but that was only part of what he told me. The big news was that Evie was going to marry him."

"He told you that? How come you never mentioned it before? Or did you?"

"Well, you see—that is, the three of them had been going steady, and everybody was sure she'd pick one or the other of them and there were some pretty big bets on who. We called it the Evie Sweepstakes and I was in pretty deep, I'd bet a half year's salary on Bruce. Think I was going to make a loser out of myself by giving out the news? I was trying to find a way of switching my bet and I'd hedged on some of it, and if folks found out—you see, mister, I was in trouble." And Sol turned and walked back to the beer spigot where a couple of customers were calling for him, but I'd learnt a lot in these last few minutes. I had the clue I'd been looking for, and it was pretty clear to me that Vic must have told Bruce the news. The brothers must have talked it over and Bruce, bereft of the only woman he could ever love, had accepted the inevitable and left to start a new career in some other part of the world.

It was a sad, sweet story, with Vic losing her on the very day he'd won her. As a result, he'd become a recluse, living with only that forever-lost memory.

The story bothered me. I kept seeing Vic's gaunt face, the hunted look in his eyes, and the next time we played chess I saw him in a different light, someone more tragic than pathetic, needing some shred of friendship to pierce the black night in which he lived, and I wondered how I could get through to him.

That would have to wait, however, because I had business with my publisher and was away for a few days. I'd left a message for Vic to the effect that I couldn't play that Tuesday but would be back the following week. When I returned from my trip I was greeted with the news that Vic had sat in his regular corner and started a

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game with himself, playing both sides. Suddenly he'd uttered a cry of pain, clutched at his side, and collapsed. By the time a doctor arrived, he was dead.

To my surprise, I was appointed executor of his estate, with half of it going to charity and the other half to me. A lawyer handed me a key to the house and told me to take a look, but not to disturb anything. The lawyer was pretty sure there was nothing in the estate except the house and a few dollars in securities. Plus a lot of worthless paintings that presumably you couldn't even sell.

Worthless? That was a premise I refused to accept. I thought of all the years Vic had been working, producing masterpieces nobody had ever seen. Why couldn't Vic be an undiscovered genius, recognized only posthumously? And here I was sitting on potential millions!

Despite my fantasy, I approached the house more in fear than in hope. I can't tell you why, except that this was the first time in twenty years that anybody except Victor Cardigan had crossed the threshold. I think the idea unnerved me, and I stood for perhaps a minute in front of the door.

I was thinking of what the trio must have been like. Three kids in their twenties, bubbling with life. A pair of brothers in love with the same girl and she trying to decide. On the one hand money, a pleasant and comfortable life in a small town, with all the security of the wife of a prominent citizen, and on the other hand a painter, maybe a life of poverty or maybe a husband with a career that was just beginning, with fame and fortune ahead. But had she really decided, as Sol had said, or was there more to the story, some facet that no one had even considered? And did this house have a clue to the tragedy and the answer as to why Evie had been in the park that night?

Suddenly angry at her, I rammed my key into the lock, turned the key, and took two long, quick strides inside. Then I stopped.

Nothing. What had I been expecting? A ghost? A stranger confronting me? Or a pet, perhaps a vicious dog waiting to attack? Ridiculous. This was merely an empty house, whose owner had died.

The first thing that impressed me was the almost hygienic cleanliness of the place, as if every item of furniture had just been polished, every inch of rug newly vacuumed. A housewife's delight, with the living room furnished in stark and yet tasteful simplicity.

I began to breathe more easily. I'd been concocting stories that had no foundation. Here was a perfectly ordinary room in a perfectly ordinary house, except for the studio. Most houses in this town not

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only had no studio, but their owners probably didn't even know what a studio looked like.

On entering it, the first thing I saw was the picture on the easel, unfinished and still smelling of paint. I'd never seen Evie, and yet I was certain that this was she. I knew she'd been beautiful, but the face on the easel had barely been sketched. This was a work in progress, too fragmentary to be judged.

I turned away from it and studied the long racks that lined three sides of the room. This was Vic's storehouse where he kept all the paintings he'd done during the past twenty years. They were probably in chronological order, for Vic had always been neat and well-organized. I'd noticed his wallet in which he kept his money in order, big bills at the back, the singles in front. Even the way he played chess, every move had to be calculated, with nothing left to chance. Protect the king before daring to plan an attack. That was the way he played and the way he conducted his life.

I bent down and slid the nearest painting from its slot. It was the portrait of a girl, a young girl in a red dress. She was radiant with youthfulness, ripe with promise. She was wearing a medallion as a necklace and her hair had a coronet of flowers. This was Evie, but which one? Art's or Linda's or Posner's or Sol's, or all of them brought together in the mind of one man. I put the picture back in its place and picked up another one.

This, too, was a portrait of Evie, but in a green dress and without the coronet. Thoughtfully, I pulled out a few more canvases. Always the same girl, painted over and over again. A different dress, a different pose, a different hair-do. Was this all I was going to find, the same picture replicated ad infinitum? Had Vic had no more imagination than the compulsion to repeat over and over again?

I moved on a few feet and pulled out another canvas. Evie of course, but this time she seemed older, some of her vibrancy and excitement had gone. This was Evie in her thirties, as Victor had imagined her.

I went further along the line and examined the paintings at random. Evie, always Evie, but now she changed. There were lines in her face, the mouth was thinner and tighter, and wrinkles had begun to expose layers hitherto hidden by the flesh of her cheeks.

I thought of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* the story of a painting that became old and mean and ugly with the dissipation of the actual man, while the man himself remained unchanged. But for Evie, the change came about through a series of paintings

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in which the inner eye of the artist drew what the mind was unable to see. And there she was, the Evie she might have been had she lived another twenty years.

Reluctantly I left the studio, not sure of what I felt, but anxious to analyze and collect my thoughts, to make some judgment of compassion or empathy or reach some cold, rational conclusion.

I went upstairs slowly. There were two rooms at the landing, one door partly open, the other one shut. I walked into the room with the door ajar.

The large double bed was covered with a white, embroidered coverlet, and on it lay a white silk nightgown. The slippers alongside the bed were white satin, and the entire room was dainty and unmistakably feminine. I stepped over to the bureau and counted the bottles of perfume and the various cosmetics. There were eleven items, all of them unopened. Evie would never have bought these. Evie, whom I was sure had never slept here or even been here. A woman Vic had invented, and worshiped for twenty years.

I leaned down and touched the nightgown, fingering the lace and feeling as if I was committing a sacrilege, for here, in this room, Evie was to have spent her wedding night, and in this room she would have borne children, grown older, and eventually died. Since it had never happened, Victor saw it in dreams, dreamt their life together, and painted her as his imagination directed him to.

And what about his brother? Had Victor believed that Bruce was the killer? And if Victor had admitted the likelihood or even the possibility, what had he done about it? Had he tried to forgive, or had he dried up inside, twisted with hate and reliving his tragedy every single day of his life?

After a few moments I straightened up, swung around slowly, and left the room. For some reason I decided to have a look at the cellar, a merely perfunctory glance, to check out the furnace and any other major piece of equipment.

The cellar had a concrete floor, swept clean. Washing machine and dryer stood against one wall, a long workbench on the other, with every tool neatly in place. It was then I noticed that the concrete had been broken up at the far end of the cellar. An area about six feet by four had been cut out and filled with dirt. Approximately, I thought, the proper size for a grave.

The next day the authorities ordered the body exhumed. It lay in a simple, homemade coffin, and the coroner examining the withered remains reported that the cause of death had been a bullet, still lodged in the withered skeleton of Bruce Cardigan. ●

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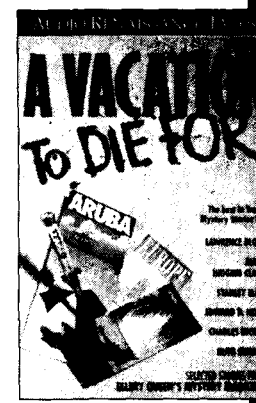

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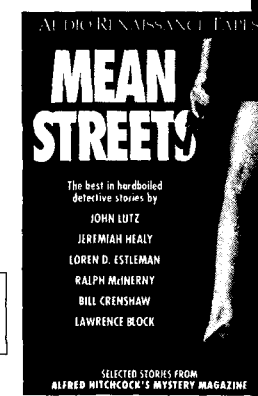

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Co-editor of the literary quarterly Passager *and one of the winners of this year's Baltimore Playwright's Festival, Sally Darnowsky previously placed a short story with* Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, *making this her second published short fiction. . . .*

WHAT JIMMY SAW

by SALLY DARNOWSKY

Ellie was about to put the corn chowder in the microwave when the phone rang. She wiped her hands and reached across the counter, glancing out the window to check on the boys. They were running in the grass between the apartments. It was always good to see them in the fresh air after such a long day, eight to six on the extended day schedule but hurray for no more shift work— "Hello?"

"Ms. Buckner, I think you should come out here."

It was Stoltz again. She scowled. "I just got home from the hospital and I'm in the middle of making supper. What's the matter this time?" She threw the dishtowel into the sink. "Why can't you just leave that old man alone?"

"Ms. Buckner, I really think you should come over, we think something might have happened to him."

"What do you mean? Did he have an accident?"

"We don't know, the door is locked and he won't answer." And Mrs. Stoltz called in the background, "Just tell her to get over here."

"Oh, all right, I'll be there as soon as I can." She banged the phone down. "They got a hell of a nerve," she muttered. She put the chowder in the fridge, then went out on the terrace and called the boys. She was ready in her jacket holding open the door when they came up the stairs.

"What's for supper?" asked Rob, bringing in a whiff of white glue and crayons from after-school. Teddy trudged behind him. She knelt down and grabbed Teddy and gave him a hug.

"Sorry, guys, we have to go out."

"Aw, Mom, I'm tired," Rob said. "Can't I stay home?"

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"No, you can't, you're not old enough." Where was that mythical friendly neighbor she was supposed to leave them with? Teddy put his arms around her neck, laid his head on her shoulder, and closed his eyes. She reached out and drew Rob to her. "Listen, guys, I'm real sorry, but it might be important. How about if we stop for a burger and shake on the way back?"

Rob eyed her. "To eat there?"

"Sure, why not."

"All right!"

"Mom, I'm hungry now," Teddy whispered.

"Here, I'll pour you a quick glass of milk. You can bring an apple and a piece of bread in the car. You want some, Rob?"

After ten minutes on the highway, they were north of the strip malls and condo developments. She took an exit that wound through sweeping hills that showed up rough with corn stubble in the headlights. The kids worked on their apples and bread in the back seat, talking softly about whacking out ninjas. The wind nudged the little car but the twists and turns of the road had become familiar over the last six months, since she had started keeping an eye on her mother's older brother.

Ellie had forgotten all about Uncle Jimmy until she started reading that Stephen King book, the one about the cornfield. It gave her nightmares about the time she got lost in the corn, all around whispering stalks taller than her head and so hot, no air. He'd come straight through the rows and picked her up as she sat in the dirt crying in anger and fear, her face smeared with mud. He hoisted her up on his shoulder—he was scrawny but strong as baling wire—and gave her his pocket rag to wipe her face. She'd read the name off his cap and thought it was his. John Deere.

She and her parents had gone to visit him a couple of times that summer she was six and then he seemed to drop out of the family; he was just a farmhand and the world passed him by the way cars passed him when he drove the harrow along the side of the road. But John Deere had rescued her from the corn and she wondered what had happend to him. After she took that book back to the library she dug her mother's old address book out of storage. He was still there, in the clapboard cottage that had once belonged to the farmhouse next door. She got into the habit of dropping in on him on Saturday while the boys were at story hour, bringing apples and frozen dinners, once in a while a three-pack of briefs or T-shirts if she could afford it. She ran around with a trash bag and went over

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the sinks and toilet with disinfectant. He didn't know who she was but he was always polite. He called her ma'am.

Then the Stoltzes moved into the farmhouse. The name sounded Amish but they were from out West somewhere. First Mr. Stoltz complained about the yard, buttonholing her one afternoon as she was getting in the car, making her late for the boys at the library. He didn't like the tractor parts and pickup hood rusting in the long grass, the garbage torn apart by raccoons. He'd gotten Chemlawn in for his own lawn, cut down the old peach trees in back and trimmed the forsythia hedge between the yards down to chest-high.

But he was a darling compared to his wife. She called Ellie late at night when she'd just gotten to sleep and accused Jimmy of sneaking around looking in windows. Then she said he followed her around with his pants open, for God's sake. She had a hot opinion of herself though she didn't look like much, late forties and running to fat, fluffy light hair. Minced around in wedgies even in the garden.

Ellie flicked on the signal to turn into Jimmy's driveway and there was Stoltz leaping awkwardly out of the headlights. She almost laughed—he was a tall heavy man and he jumped into the long grass as if the gravel were red-hot. She pulled up in front of the cottage and killed the engine, then turned around in the seat to tell the boys she'd only be a minute. They were sound asleep. She got out into the wind and eased the door closed until the overhead went out. Stoltz came close up, looming over her. She stepped back. "What's going on?" she asked.

"We had a little problem before and now he doesn't answer the door."

"What kind of a problem? Is he all right? Did you two do something to him?"

"Look, would you mind just checking, see if he's okay?"

"I'm not going to get a straight answer out of you, am I?" She swung the screen door open wide and he caught it.

"Want me to come in with you?"

"Hey, I don't care." Ellie found the key on her ring and unlocked the door. Across the two yards the Stoltzes' porch light came on and Mrs. Stoltz stepped out. She stopped at the railing, one hand hovering around her mouth.

"Reuben? Reu-u-ben?"

He looked at Ellie and made a little helpless movement with his hands. "She's been through a lot," he said. Ellie shrugged, and he turned and went back to his wife.

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The kitchen was dark, and she switched on the light. God, the place was depressing. She hadn't been here for a couple of weeks and the trash bag was overflowing. The floor and table were grimy. Something smelled awful, like— She pulled open the living room window, then checked the bathroom bowl, but it was empty.

"Damn it," she whispered, then called, "Jimmy? Jimmy?" She ran into the bedroom but he wasn't there either. Not in the closet. The attic steps were down. She slammed her fist twice against the dry wood. "God damn it!" It was dark up there but she eased up the first couple of steps and saw him, swinging against the light from the Stoltzes' porch that came through the gable window. His head was at a funny angle. The wind was loud up here among the beams and rafters and he swayed, a sack of old clothes.

She slid down the steps, driving a long splinter into her palm. "Damn it, Jimmy—" Her face was wet and she gulped air. She was used to death, but that was John Deere and this was no hospital. She got into the kitchen and found an unused roll of paper towels, ripped open the plastic, and pulled off a handful to wipe her face. She scratched the splinter out and folded a paper pad over the bleeding. She was choking, couldn't breathe. She got out of the house, into the air. The wind was moving, tossing bare branches against the sky.

They were waiting on the porch but they turned and hurried inside when they saw her come out. She went past her car, past her sleeping boys. The wind dried her face. She stepped through the forsythias onto their lawn. Their porch was smooth with new paint. A brass number hung above the door. The drapes were pulled aside from one of the tall sash windows and Ellie saw peach-colored chintz on the living room furniture. Stoltz stood in the kitchen doorway with his arms around his wife, her head against his shoulder. She lifted her face to him and tears shone on her cheeks.

Ellie banged on the door. He broke away and opened it and she said, "What the hell did you do to him?"

"Is the old man all right?"

"He killed himself."

"My God—"

"You call the cops. Now."

"I was afraid—"

"Call them. Now."

"You're right, I'll call them right away— Come in."

"You got to be kidding."

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He hesitated, but she raised her fist, the bloody one. He shrank back, then crossed the living room and went past his wife into the kitchen, out of Ellie's sight. She heard the clatter of the receiver, the tones of the dialed numbers. "Uh, this is the Stoltzes, on Rugby Mill Road—?"

Ellie and Mrs. Stoltz stared at each other. The kitchen was done up in fake farmhouse, blue gingham and wheatstraw wreaths. Supper smells wafted out the door, beef and gravy and hot apple pastry. Ellie's stomach rumbled. She crossed her arms over it. She'd had only a salad for lunch and her kids were waiting for fast-food burgers. Ellie stared at her and the woman gnawed her lips, then made a decision and came forward.

"You don't know what it was like," she pleaded. "He was always sniffing around me like some dirty dog. I couldn't get in the car to go to the store without him eyeing me, I couldn't work outside, he'd come out with his pants open— Yesterday he came up behind me naked below the waist— I cried all night—"

"Why didn't you call me?"

"—So sick of him sneaking around looking in the windows, waiting for us to do something dirty—"

"You could've called me—I would've come—"

"You never did anything about him—"

"I was here as often as—"

"—You could have put him away but you never did a thing. He was dirty, trying to make me ashamed of loving—I love my husband! I'm not ashamed of what we did! After supper we took a blanket out in the backyard and we—we—"

"Liza!" Stoltz hurried from the kitchen to stand beside her. He put his arm around her. She looked up at him and bravely tried to smile. Ellie pictured the three of them, Stoltz covering her, poor scrawny Jimmy darting back and forth behind the forsythias in shame and frustration, she glancing over her shoulder at the end, slyly triumphant, like a spiteful child chanting "I have something you don't have . . ."

Stoltz said heavily, "It was a stupid thing to do, but she was so upset. I can't tell you how sorry we are."

Mrs. Stoltz said, "I'm not sorry."

Ellie looked at her. "The man is dead—" she began, but then her vision seemed to clear and she remembered not too long ago when Rob and Teddy were infants, when nothing was real to them but their own warm bellies, their own warm cribs.

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The rich food smells were cloying, and Ellie stepped back into the wind. Jimmy had hanged himself but that wasn't John Deere there in the attic, humiliated into a sordid death. John Deere was a sunny place in her mind, hoisting her onto his skinny shoulder, brushing the hair out of her mouth, and laughing at her babyish fear. She'd done the best she could by him and now she didn't have to bother with these people any more.

She asked, "Do you have kids?" and Mrs. Stoltz's mouth hung open in surprise.

He said slowly, "No, we tried, but— No, we never had any."

Ellie nodded. "My kids are in the car." She turned away and said, "You tell the cops they can call me at home." She went down the steps.

Mrs. Stoltz cried, "Where are you going? You can't leave yet," but Rob and Teddy were waiting in the car and Ellie had promised them a burger and shake.

"Q"

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Roman private investigator Gordianus the Finder is "something like Sherlock Holmes (he amazes clients with off-the-wall deductions) and something like the hardboiled American P.I. (he tells his own story, has an active sex life, engages in much physical action, and repeatedly describes his dreams)," said EQMM*'s columnist Jon L. Breen in reviewing Steven Saylor's first novel,* Roman Blood, *which featured Gordianus. We think Mr. Saylor's powers of invention are remarkable, as does Mr. Breen, who says of Saylor's book, "If the awards-givers can find a better first mystery in 1991, I want to read it." We rejoin Gordianus here with a story of murder in the ancient Roman theater . . .*

DEATH WEARS A MASK

by STEVEN SAYLOR

"Eco," I said, "do you mean to tell me that you have never seen a play?"

He looked up at me with his big brown eyes and shook his head.

"Never laughed at the slaves on stage who have a falling-out and bludgeon each other with clubs made of cork? Never swooned to see the young heroine abducted by pirates? *Never* thrilled at the discovery that our hero is not the penniless vagabond we thought, but the secret heir to a vast fortune?"

Eco's eyes grew even larger, and he shook his head more vigorously from side to side.

"Then there must be a remedy, this very day!" I said.

It was the Ides of September, and a more beautiful autumn day the gods had never fashioned. The sun shone warmly on the narrow streets and gurgling fountains of Rome; a light breeze swept up from the Tiber, cooling the seven hills; the sky above was a bowl of purest azure, without a single cloud. It was the twelfth day of the sixteen days set aside each year for the Roman Festival, the city's oldest public holiday. Perhaps Jupiter himself had decreed that the weather should be so perfect; the holiday was in his honor.

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For Eco, the Festival had been an endless orgy of discoveries. He had seen his first chariot race in the Circus Maximus, had watched wrestlers and boxers in the public squares, had eaten his first calf's-brain-and-almond sausage from a street vendor. The race had thrilled him, mostly because he thought the horses so beautiful; the pugilists had bored him, since he had seen plenty of brawling in public before; the sausage had not agreed with him (or perhaps his problem was the spiced green apples he gorged himself on later).

It was four months since I had rescued Eco in an alley in the Subura, from a gang of boys pursuing him with sticks and cruel jeers. I knew a little of his history, having met him briefly in my investigations for Cicero that spring. Apparently his widowed mother had chosen to abandon little Eco in her desperation, leaving him to fend for himself. What else could I do but take him home with me?

He struck me as exceedingly clever for a boy of ten. I knew he was ten, because whenever I asked, he held up ten fingers. Eco could hear (and add) perfectly well, but his tongue was useless.

At first, his muteness was a great handicap for us both. (A fever caused it—the same fever that claimed his father's life.) Eco is a skillful mime, to be sure, but gestures can convey only so much. Someone had taught him the letters—the widow Polia, perhaps, or the boy's father before he died—but he could read and write only the simplest words. I had begun to teach him myself, but the going was made harder by his speechlessness.

His practical knowledge of the streets of Rome was deep but narrow. He knew all the back entrances to all the shops in the Subura, knew where the fish and meat vendors down by the Tiber left their scraps at the end of the day. But he had never been to the Forum or the Circus Maximus or the hot springs at Tarentum, had never heard a politician declaim (lucky boy!) or witnessed the spectacle of the theater. I spent many hours showing him the city that summer, rediscovering its marvels through the wide eyes of a ten-year-old boy.

So it was that, on the twelfth day of the Roman Festival, when a crier came running through the streets announcing that the company of Quintus Roscius would be performing in an hour, I determined that we should not miss it.

"Ah, the company of Roscius the Comedian!" I said. "The magistrates in charge of the Festival have spared no expense. There is no

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more famous actor today than Quintus Roscius, and no more renowned troupe of performers than his!"

We made our way from the Subura down to the Forum, where holiday crowds thronged the open squares. Between the Temple of Jupiter Stator and the Senian Baths, a makeshift theater had been erected. Rows of benches were set before a wooden stage that had been raised in the narrow space between the brick walls.

"Some day," I remarked, "a rabble-rousing politician will build the first permanent theater in Rome. Imagine that, a proper theater made of stone, as sturdy as a temple! The old-fashioned moralists will be scandalized, of course—they hate the theater because it comes from Greece, and they think that all things Greek must be decadent and dangerous. Ah, we're early—we shall have good seats."

The usher led us to an aisle seat on a bench five rows back from the stage. The first four rows had been partitioned by a rope of purple cloth, set aside for those of senatorial rank. Occasionally the usher tromped down the aisle, followed by some toga-clad magistrate and his party, and pulled aside the rope to allow them access to the benches.

While the theater slowly filled around us, I pointed out to Eco the details of the stage. Before the first row of benches there was a small open space, the orchestra, where the musicians would play; three steps at either side led up to the stage itself. Behind the stage and enclosing it on either side was a screen of wood with a folding door in the middle and other doors set into the left and right wings. Through these doors the actors would enter and exit. Out of sight, behind the stage, the musicians could be heard warming up their pipes, trilling snatches of familiar tunes.

"Gordianus!"

I turned to see a tall, thin figure looming over us.

"Statilius!" I cried "It's good to see you."

"And you as well. But who is this?" He ruffled Eco's mop of brown hair with his long fingers.

"This is Eco," I said.

"A long-lost nephew."

"Not exactly."

"Ah. An indiscretion from the past?" Statilius raised a suggestive eyebrow.

"Not that, either." My face turned hot. And yet, I suddenly wondered, how would it have felt to say: "Yes, this is my son." Not for the first time I considered the possibility of adopting Eco le-

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gally—and as quickly banished the thought from my mind. A man like myself, who often risks death, has no business becoming a father; so I told myself. If I truly wanted sons, I could have married a proper Roman wife long ago and had a houseful by now. I quickly changed the subject.

"But Statilius, where is your costume and mask? Why aren't you backstage, getting ready?" I had known Statilius since we both were boys; he had become an actor in his youth, joining first one company and then another, always seeking the training of established comedians. The great Roscius had taken him on a year before.

"Oh, I still have plenty of time to get ready."

"And how is life in the company of the greatest actor in Rome?"

"Wonderful, of course!"

I frowned at the note of false bravado in his voice.

"Ah, Gordianus, you always could see through me. Not wonderful, then—terrible! Roscius—what a monster! Brilliant, to be sure, but a beast! If I were a slave I'd be covered with bruises. Instead, he whips me with his tongue. What a taskmaster! The man is relentless, and never satisfied. He makes a man feel no better than a worm. The galleys or the mines could hardly be worse. Is it my fault that I've grown too old to play heroines and haven't yet the proper voice to be an old miser or a braggart soldier? Ah, perhaps Roscius is right. I'm useless—talentless—I bring the whole company into disrepute."

"Actors are all alike," I whispered to Eco. "They need more coddling than babies." Then to Statilius: "Nonsense! I saw you in the spring, at the Festival of the Great Mother, when Roscius put on *The Brothers Menaechmus*. You were brilliant playing the twins."

"Do you really think so?"

"I swear it. I laughed so hard I almost fell off the bench."

He brightened a bit, then frowned. "I wish that Roscius thought so. Today I was all set to play Euclio, the old miser—"

"Ah, then we're seeing *The Pot of Gold?*"

"Yes—"

"One of my favorite plays, Eco. Quite possibly Plautus's funniest comedy. Crude, yet satisfying . . ."

"I was to play Euclio," Statilius said rather sharply, drawing the conversation back to himself, "when suddenly, this morning, Roscius explodes into a rage and says that I have the role all wrong, and that he can't suffer the humiliation of seeing me bungle it in front of all Rome. Instead I'll be Megadorus, the next-door neighbor."

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"Another fine role," I said, trying to remember it.

"Fah! And who gets the plum role of Euclio? That parasite Panurgus—a mere slave, with no more comic timing than a slug!" He abruptly stiffened. "Oh no, what's this?"

I followed his gaze to the outer aisle, where the usher was leading a burly, bearded man toward the front of the theater. A blond giant with a scar across his nose followed close behind—the bearded man's bodyguard; I know a hired ruffian from the Subura when I see one. The usher led them to the far end of our bench; they stepped into the gap and headed toward us to take the empty spot beside Eco.

Statilius bent low to hide himself and groaned into my ear. "As if I hadn't enough worries—it's that awful moneylender Flavius and one of his hired bullies. The only man in Rome who's more of a monster than Roscius."

"And just how much do you owe this Flavius?" I began to say, when suddenly, from backstage, a roaring voice rose above the discordant pipes.

"Fool! Incompetent! Don't come to me now saying you can't remember the lines!"

"Roscius," Statilius whispered, "screaming at Panurgus, I hope. The man's temper is terrible."

The central door on the stage flew open, revealing a short, stocky man already dressed for the stage, wearing a splendid cloak of rich white fabric. His lumpy, scowling face was the sort to send terror into an underling's soul, yet this was, by universal acclaim, the funniest man in Rome. His legendary squint made his eyes almost invisible, but when he looked in our direction, I felt as if a dagger had been thrown past my ear and into the heart of Statilius.

"And you!" he bellowed. "Where have you been? Backstage, immediately! No, don't bother to go the long way round—backstage, now!" He gave commands as if he were speaking to a dog.

Statilius hurried up the aisle, leaped onto the stage, and disappeared backstage, closing the door behind him—but not, I noticed, before casting a furtive glance at the newcomer who had just seated himself beside Eco. I turned and looked at Flavius the moneylender, who returned my curious gaze with a scowl. He did not look like a man in the proper mood for a comedy.

I cleared my throat. "Today you'll see *The Pot of Gold,*" I said pleasantly, leaning toward the newcomers. Flavius gave a start and wrinkled his bushy brows. "One of Plautus's very best plays, don't you think?"

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Flavius parted his lips and peered at me suspiciously. The blond bodyguard looked at me with an expression of supreme stupidity.

I shrugged and turned my attention elsewhere.

From the open square behind us the crier made his last announcement. The benches rapidly filled. Latecomers and slaves stood wherever they could, crowding together on tiptoe. Two musicians stepped onto the stage and descended to the orchestra, where they began to blow upon their long pipes.

A murmur of recognition passed through the crowd at the familiar strains of the miser Euclio's theme, the first indication of the play we were about to see. Meanwhile the usher and the crier moved up and down the aisles, playfully hushing the noisier members of the audience.

At length the overture was finished. The central door on the stage rattled open. Out stepped Roscius, wearing his sumptuous white cloak, his head obscured by a mask of grotesque, happy countenance. Through the holes I glimpsed his squinting eyes; his mellow voice resonated throughout the theater.

"In case you don't know who I am, let me briefly introduce myself," he said. "I am the Guardian Spirit of this house—Euclio's house. I have been in charge of this place now for a great many years. . . ." He proceeded to deliver the prologue, giving the audience a starting point for the familiar story—how the grandfather of Euclio had hidden a pot of gold beneath the floorboards of the house; how Euclio had a daughter who was in love with the next-door neighbor's nephew, and needed only a dowry to be happily married; and how he, the Guardian Spirit, intended to guide the greedy Euclio to the pot of gold and so set events in motion.

I glanced at Eco, who stared up at the masked figure enraptured, hanging on every word. Beside him, the moneylender Flavius wore the same unhappy scowl as before. The blond bodyguard sat with his mouth open and occasionally reached up to pick at the scar across his nose.

A muffled commotion was heard from backstage. "Ah," said Roscius in a theatrical whisper, "there's old Euclio now, pitching a fit as usual. The greedy miser must have located the pot of gold by now, and he wants to count his fortune in secret, so he's turning the old housekeeper out of the house." He quietly withdrew through the door in the right wing.

Through the central door emerged a figure wearing an old man's mask and dressed in bright yellow, the traditional color for greed.

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This was Panurgus, the slave-actor, taking the plum leading role of the miser Euclio. Behind him he dragged another actor dressed as a lowly female slave, and flung him to the middle of the stage. "Get out!" he shouted. "Out! By Hades, out with you, you old snooping bag of bones!"

Statilius had been wrong to disparage Panurgus's comic gifts; already I heard guffaws and laughter around me.

"What have I done? What? What?" cried the other actor. His grimacing feminine mask was surmounted by a hideous tangled wig. His gown was in tatters about his knobby knees. "Why are you beating a long-suffering old hag?"

"To give you something to be long-suffering about, that's why! And to make you suffer as much as I do, just looking at you!" Panurgus and his fellow actor scurried about the stage, to the uproarious amusement of the audience. Eco bounced up and down on the bench and clapped his hands. The moneylender and his bodyguard sat with their arms crossed, unimpressed.

HOUSEKEEPER: *But why must you drive me out of the house?*

EUCLIO: *Why? Since when do I have to give you a reason? You're asking for a fresh crop of bruises!*

HOUSEKEEPER: *Let the gods send me jumping off a cliff if I'll put up with this sort of slavery any longer!*

EUCLIO: *What's she muttering to herself? I've a good mind to poke your eyes out, you damned witch!*

At length the slavewoman disappeared and the miser went back into his house to count his money; the neighbor Megadorus and his sister Eunomia occupied the stage. From the voice, it seemed to me that the sister was played by the same actor who had performed the cringing slavewoman; no doubt he specialized in female characters. My friend Statilius, as Megadorus, performed adequately, I thought, but he was not in the same class with Roscius, or even with his rival Panurgus. His comic turns inspired polite guffaws, not raucous laughter.

EUNOMIA: *Dear brother, I've asked you out of the house to have a little talk about your private affairs.*

MEGADORUS: *How sweet! You are as thoughtful as you are beautiful. I kiss your hand.*

EUNOMIA: *What? Are you talking to someone behind me?*

MEGADORUS: *Of course not. You're the prettiest woman I know!*

EUNOMIA: *Don't be absurd. Every woman is uglier than every other, in one way or another.*

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MEGADORUS: *Mmm, but of course, whatever you say.*
EUNOMIA: *Now give me your attention. Brother dear, I should like to see you married—*
MEGADORUS: *Help! Murder! Ruin!*
EUNOMIA: *Oh, quiet down!*

Even this exchange, usually so pleasing to the crowd, evoked only lukewarm titters. My attention strayed to Statilius's costume, made of sumptuous blue wool embroidered with yellow, and to his mask, with its absurdly quizzical eyebrows. Alas, I thought, it is a bad sign when a comedian's costume is of greater interest than his delivery. Poor Statilius had found a place with the most respected acting troupe in Rome, but he did not shine there. No wonder the demanding Roscius was so intolerant of him!

Even Eco grew restless. Next to him, the moneylender Flavius leaned over to whisper something in the ear of his blond bodyguard—disparaging the talents of the actor who owed him money, I thought.

At length, the sister exited; the miser returned to converse with his neighbor. Seeing the two of them together on the stage—Statilius and his rival Panurgus—the gulf between their talents was painfully clear. Panurgus as Euclio stole the scene completely, and not just because his lines were better.

EUCLIO: *So you wish to marry my daughter. Good enough—but you must know I haven't so much as a copper to donate to her dowry.*
MEGADORUS: *I don't expect even half a copper. Her virtue and good name are quite enough.*
EUCLIO: *I mean to say, it's not as if I'd just happened to have found some, oh, buried treasure in my house . . . say, a pot of gold buried by my grandfather, or . . .*
MEGADORUS: *Of course not—how ridiculous! Say no more. You'll give your daughter to me, then?*
EUCLIO: *Agreed. But what's that? Oh no, I'm ruined!*
MEGADORUS: *Jupiter Almighty, what's wrong?*
EUCLIO: *I thought I heard a spade . . . someone digging . . .*
MEGADORUS: *Why, it's only a slave I've got digging up some roots in my garden. Calm down, good neighbor. . . .*

I inwardly groaned for my friend Statilius; but if his delivery was flat, he had learned to follow the master's stage directions without a misstep. Roscius was famous not only for embellishing the old comedies with colorful costumes and masks to delight the eyes, but

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for choreographing the movements of his actors. Statilius and Panurgus were never static on the stage, like the actors in inferior companies. They circled one another in a constant comic dance, a swirl of blue and yellow.

Eco tugged at my sleeve. With a shrug of his shoulder he gestured to the men beside him. Flavius was again whispering in the bodyguard's ear; the big blond was wrinkling his eyebrows, perplexed. Then he rose and lumbered toward the aisle. Eco drew up his feet, but I was too slow. The monster stepped on my foot. I let out a howl. Others around me started doing the same, thinking I was badgering the actors. The blond giant made no apology at all.

Eco tugged at my sleeve. "Let it go, Eco," I said. "One must learn to live with rudeness in the theater."

He only rolled his eyes and crossed his arms in exasperation. I knew that gesture: if only he could speak!

On the stage, the two neighbors concluded their plans for Megadorus to wed the daughter of Euclio; with a shrilling of pipes and the tinkling of cymbals, they left the stage and the first act was done.

The pipe players introduced a new theme. After a moment, two new actors appeared on stage. These were the quarreling cooks, summoned to prepare the wedding feast. A Roman audience delights in jokes about food and gluttony, the cruder the better. While I groaned at the awful puns, Eco laughed aloud, making a hoarse, barking sound.

In the midst of the gaiety, my blood turned cold. Above the laughter, I heard a scream.

It was not a woman's scream, but a man's. Not a scream of fear, but of pain.

I looked at Eco, who looked back at me. He had heard it, too. No one else in the audience seemed to have noticed, but the actors on stage must have heard something. They bungled their lines and turned uncertainly toward the door, stepping on one another's feet. The audience only laughed harder at their clumsiness.

The quarreling cooks came to the end of their scene and disappeared backstage.

The stage was empty. There was a pause that grew longer and longer. Strange, unaccountable noises came from backstage—muffled gasps, confused shuffling, a loud shout. The audience began to murmur and move about on the benches.

At last the door from the left wing soundlessly opened. Onto the stage stepped a figure wearing the mask of the miser Euclio. He was

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dressed in bright yellow, but not in the same cloak as before. He threw his hands in the air. "Disaster!" he cried. I felt a cold shiver down my spine.

"Disaster!" he said again. "A daughter's marriage is a disaster! How can any man afford it? I've just come back from the market, and you wouldn't believe what they're charging for lamb—an arm and a leg for an arm and a leg, that's what they want. . . ."

The character was miserly Euclio, but the actor was no longer Panurgus; it was Roscius behind the mask. The audience seemed not to notice the substitution, or at least not to mind it; they started laughing almost immediately at the spectacle of poor Euclio befuddled by his own stinginess.

Roscius delivered the lines flawlessly, with the practiced comic timing that comes from having played a role many times, but I thought I heard a strange quavering in his voice. When he turned so that I could glimpse his eyes within the mask, I saw no sign of his famous squint. His eyes were wide with alarm. Was this Roscius the actor, frightened of something very real—or Euclio, afraid that the squabbling cooks would find his treasure?

"What's that shouting from the kitchen?" he cried. "Oh no, they're calling for a bigger pot to put the chicken in! Oh, my pot of gold!" He ran through the door backstage, almost tripping over his yellow cloak. There followed a cacophony of crashing pots.

The central door was thrown open. One of the cooks emerged on stage, crying out in a panic, "Help, help, help!"

It was the voice of Statilius! I stiffened and started to stand, but the words were only part of the play. "It's a madhouse in there," he cried, straightening his mask. He jumped from the stage and ran into the audience. "The miser Euclio's gone mad! He's beating us over the head with pots and pans! Citizens, come to our rescue!" He whirled about the central aisle until he came to a halt beside me. He bent low and spoke through his teeth so that only I could hear.

"Gordianus! Come backstage, now!"

I gave a start. Through the mask I looked into Statilius's anxious eyes.

"Backstage!" he hissed. "Come quick! A dagger—blood—Panurgus—murder!"

From beyond the maze of screens and awnings and platforms I occasionally heard the playing of the pipes and actor's voices raised in argument, followed by the muffled roar of the audience laughing.

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Backstage, the company of Quintus Roscius ran about in a panic, changing costumes, fitting masks onto one another's heads, mumbling lines beneath their breath, sniping at each other or exchanging words of encouragement, and in every other way trying to act as if this were simply another hectic performance and that a corpse was not lying in their midst.

The body was that of the slave Panurgus. He lay on his back in a secluded little alcove in the alley that ran behind the Temple of Jupiter. The place was a public privy, one of many built in out-of-the-way nooks on the perimeter of the Forum. Screened by two walls, a sloping floor tilted to a hole that emptied into the Cloaca Maxima. Panurgus had apparently come here to relieve himself between scenes. Now he lay dead with a knife plunged squarely into his chest. Above his heart a large red circle stained his bright yellow costume. A sluggish stream of blood trickled across the tiles and ran down the drain.

He was older than I had thought, almost as old as his master, with grey in his hair and a wrinkled forehead. His mouth and eyes were open wide in shock; his eyes were green, and in death they glittered dully like uncut emeralds.

Eco gazed down at the body and reached up to grasp my hand. Statilius ran up beside us. He was dressed in blue again and held the mask of Megadorus in his hands. His face was ashen. "Madness," he whispered. "Bloody madness."

"Shouldn't the play be stopped?"

"Roscius refuses. Not for a slave, he says. And he doesn't dare tell the crowd. Imagine: a murder, backstage, in the middle of our performance, on a holiday consecrated to Jupiter himself, in the very shadow of the god's temple—what an omen! What magistrate would ever hire Roscius and the company again? No, the show goes on—even though we must somehow figure out how to fill nine roles with five actors instead of six. Oh dear, and I've never learned the nephew's lines. . . ."

"Statilius!" It was Roscius, returning from the stage. He threw off the mask of Euclio. His own face was far more grotesque, contorted with fury. "What do you think you're doing, standing there mumbling? If I'm playing Euclio, you have to play the nephew!" He rubbed his squinting eyes, then slapped his forehead. "But no, that's impossible—Megadorus and the nephew must be on stage at the same time. What a disaster! Jupiter, why me?"

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The actors circled one another like frenzied bees. The dressers hovered about them uncertainly, as useless as drones. All was chaos in the company of Quintus Roscius.

I looked down at the bloodless face of Panurgus, who was beyond caring. All men become the same in death, whether slave or citizen, Roman or Greek, genius or pretender.

At last the play was over. The old bachelor Megadorus had escaped the clutches of marriage; miserly Euclio had lost and then recovered his pot of gold; the honest slave who restored it to him had been set free; the quarreling cooks had been paid by Megadorus and sent on their way; and the young lovers had been joyously betrothed. How this was accomplished under the circumstances, I do not know. By some miracle of the theater, everything came off without a hitch. The cast assembled together on the stage to roaring applause, and then returned backstage, their exhilaration at once replaced by the grim reality of the death among them.

"Madness," Statilius said again, hovering over the corpse. Knowing how he felt about his rival, I had to wonder if he was not secretly gloating. He seemed genuinely shocked, but that, after all, could have been acting.

"And who is this?" barked Roscius, tearing off the yellow cloak he had assumed to play the miser.

"My name is Gordianus. Men call me the Finder."

Roscius raised an eyebrow and nodded. "Ah, yes, I've heard of you. Last spring—the case of Sextus Roscius; no relation to myself, I'm glad to say, or very distant, anyway. You earned yourself a name with parties on both sides of that affair."

Knowing Roscius was an intimate of the dictator Sulla, whom I had grossly offended, I only nodded.

"So what are you doing here?" Roscius demanded.

"It was I who told him," said Statilius helplessly. "I asked him to come backstage. It was the first thing I thought of."

"You invited an outsider to intrude on this tragedy, Statilius? Fool! What's to keep him from standing in the Forum and announcing the news to everyone who passes? The scandal will be disastrous."

"I assure you, I can be quite discreet—for a client," I said.

"Oh, I see," said Roscius, squinting at me shrewdly. "Perhaps that's not a bad idea, provided you could actually be of some help."

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"I think I might," I said modestly, already calculating a fee. Roscius was, after all, the most highly paid actor in the world. Rumor claimed he made as much as half a million sesterces in a single year. He could afford to be generous.

He looked down at the corpse and shook his head bitterly. "One of my most promising pupils. Not just a gifted artist, but a valuable piece of property. But why should anyone murder the slave? Panurgus had no vices, no politics, no enemies."

"It's a rare man who has no enemies," I said. I could not help but glance at Statilius, who hurriedly looked away.

There was a commotion among the gathered actors and stagehands. The crowd parted to admit a tall, cadaverous figure with a shock of red hair.

"Chaerea! Where have you been?" growled Roscius.

The newcomer looked down his long nose, first at the corpse, then at Roscius. "Drove down from my villa at Fidenae," he snapped tersely. "Axle on the chariot broke. Missed more than the play, it appears."

"Gaius Fannius Chaerea," whispered Statilius in my ear. "He was Panurgus's original owner. When he saw the slave had comic gifts he handed him over to Roscius to train him, as part-owner."

"They don't seem friendly," I whispered back.

"They've been feuding over how to calculate the profits from Panurgus's performances. . . ."

"So, Quintus Roscius," sniffed Chaerea, tilting his nose even higher, "this is how you take care of our common property. Bad management, I say. Slave's worthless, now. I'll send you a bill for my share."

"What? You think I'm responsible for this?" Roscius squinted fiercely.

"Slave was in your care; now he's dead. Theater people! So irresponsible." Chaerea ran his bony fingers through his orange mane and shrugged haughtily before turning his back. "Expect my bill tomorrow," he said, stepping through the crowd to join a coterie of attendants waiting in the alley. "Or I'll see you in court."

"Outrageous!" said Roscius. "You!" He pointed a stubby finger at me. "This is your job! Find out who did this, and why. If it was a slave or a pauper, I'll have him torn apart. If it was a rich man, I'll sue him blind for destroying my property. I'll go to Hades before I give Chaerea the satisfaction of saying this was my fault!"

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I accepted the job with a grave nod and tried not to smile. I could almost feel the rain of glittering silver on my head. Then I glimpsed the contorted face of the dead Panurgus, and felt the full gravity of my commission. For a dead slave in Rome, there is seldom any attempt to find justice. I would find the killer, I silently vowed, not for Roscius and his silver, but to honor the shade of an artist cruelly cut down in his prime.

"Very well, Roscius. I will need to ask some questions. See that no one in the company leaves until I am done with him. If I may, I would talk with you in private first. Perhaps a cup of wine would calm us both. . . ."

Late that afternoon, I sat on a bench beneath the shade of an olive tree, on a quiet street not far from the Temple of Jupiter. Eco sat beside me, pensively studying the play of leafy shadows on the paving stones.

"So, Eco, what do you think? Have we learned anything of value?"

He shook his head gravely from side to side.

"You judge too quickly." I laughed. "Consider: we last saw Panurgus alive during his scene with Statilius at the close of the first act. Then those two left the stage; the pipers played an interlude, and next the quarreling cooks came on. Then there was a scream. That must have been Panurgus, when he was stabbed. It caused a commotion backstage; Roscius checked into the matter and discovered the body in the privy. Word quickly spread among the others. Roscius put on the dead man's mask and a yellow cloak, the closest thing he had to match Panurgus's costume, and rushed on stage just in time to keep the play going. Statilius, meanwhile, put on a cook's costume so that he could jump into the audience and plead for my help.

"Therefore, we know at least one thing: the actors playing the cooks were innocent, as were the pipe players, because they were on stage when the murder occurred."

Eco made a face to show he was not impressed.

"Yes, this is all very elementary, but to build a wall we begin with the first row of bricks. Now, who was backstage at the time of the murder, has no one to account for his whereabouts at the moment of the scream, and might have wanted Panurgus dead?"

Eco bounded up from the bench, ready to play the game. He performed a pantomime, jabbering with his jaw and waving his arms at himself.

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I smiled sadly; the unflattering portrait could only be my talkative and self-absorbed friend Statilius. "Yes, Statilius must be foremost among the suspects, though I regret to say it. We know he had cause to hate Panurgus; so long as the slave was alive, a man of inferior talent like Statilius would never be given the best roles. We also learned, from questioning the company, that when the scream was heard, no one could account for Statilius's whereabouts. This may be only a coincidence, given the ordinary chaos that seems to reign backstage during a performance. Statilius himself vows that he was busy in a corner adjusting his costume. In his favor, he seems to have been truly shocked at the slave's death—but he might only be pretending. I call the man my friend, but do I really know him?"

I pondered for a moment. "Who else, Eco?"

He hunched his shoulders, scowled, and squinted.

"Yes, Roscius was also backstage when Panurgus screamed, and no one seems to remember seeing him at that instant. It was he who found the corpse—or was he there when the knife descended? Roscius is a violent man; all his actors say so. We heard him shouting angrily at someone before the play began—do you remember? 'Fool! Incompetent! Why can't you remember your lines?' Roscius now claims he can't remember the incident at all, but others saw him and told me it was Panurgus he was shouting at. Did the slave's performance in the first act displease him so much that he flew into a rage, lost his head, and murdered him? It hardly seems likely; I thought Panurgus was doing quite well. And Roscius, like Statilius, seemed genuinely offended by the murder. But then, Roscius is an actor of great skill."

Eco put his hands on his hips and his nose in the air and began to strut haughtily.

"Ah, Chaerea; I was coming to him. He claims not to have arrived until after the play was over, and yet he hardly seemed taken aback when he saw the corpse. He seems almost *too* unflappable. He was the slave's original owner. In return for cultivating Panurgus's talents, Roscius acquired half-ownership, but Chaerea seems to have been thoroughly dissatisfied with the arrangement. Did he decide that the slave was worth more to him dead than alive? Chaerea holds Roscius culpable for the loss, and intends to coerce Roscius into paying him half the slave's worth in silver. In a Roman court, with the right advocate, Chaerea will likely prevail."

I leaned back against the olive tree, dissatisfied. "Still, I wish we had uncovered someone else in the company with as strong a motive,

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and the opportunity to have done the deed. Yet no one seems to have borne a grudge against Panurgus, and almost everyone could account for his whereabouts when the victim screamed.

"Of course, the murderer may be someone from outside the company; the privy where Panurgus was stabbed was accessible to anyone passing through the alley behind the temple. Yet Roscius tells us, and the others confirm, that Panurgus had almost no dealings with anyone outside the troupe—he did not gamble or frequent brothels; he borrowed neither money nor other men's wives. His craft alone consumed him; so everyone says. Even if Panurgus *had* offended someone, the aggrieved party would surely have taken up the matter not with Panurgus but with Roscius, since he was the slave's owner and the man legally responsible for his actions."

I sighed with frustration. "The knife left in his heart was a common dagger, with no distinguishing features. No footprints surrounded the body. No telltale blood was found on any of the costumes. There were no witnesses, or none we knew of. Alas!" The shower of silver in my imagination dried to a trickle; with nothing to show, I would be lucky to press Roscius into paying me a day's fee for my trouble. Even worse, I felt the shade of dead Panurgus watching me. I had vowed I would find his killer, and it seemed the vow was rashly made.

That night I took my dinner in the ramshackle garden at the center of my house. The lamps burned low. Fireflies flitted among the columns of the peristyle. Sounds of distant revelry occasionally wafted up from the streets of the Subura at the foot of the hill.

"Bethesda, the meal was exquisite," I said, lying with my usual grace. Perhaps I could have been an actor, I thought.

But Bethesda was not fooled. She looked at me from beneath her long lashes and smiled with half her mouth. She combed one hand through the great unbound mass of her glossy black hair and shrugged an elegant shrug, then began to clear the table.

As she departed to the kitchen, I watched the sinuous play of her hips within her loose green stola. When I bought her long ago at the slave market in Alexandria, it had not been for her cooking. Her cooking had never improved, but in many other ways she was beyond perfection. I peered into the blackness of the long tresses that cascaded to her waist; I imagined the fireflies lost in those tresses, like twinkling stars in the blue-black firmament of the sky. Before Eco had come into my life, Bethesda and I had spent almost every

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night together, just the two of us, in the solitude of the garden . . .

I was startled from my reverie by a tiny hand pulling at the hem of my tunic.

"Yes, Eco, what is it?"

Eco, reclining on the couch next to mine, put his fists together and pulled them apart, up and down, as if unrolling a scroll.

"Ah, your reading lesson. We had no time for it today, did we? But my eyes are weary, Eco, and yours must be, too. And there are other matters on my mind. . . ."

He frowned at me in mock-dejection until I relented. "Very well. Bring that lamp nearer. What would you like to read tonight?"

Eco pointed at himself and shook his head, then pointed at me. He cupped his hands behind his ears and closed his eyes. He preferred it (and secretly, so did I) when I did the reading, and he could enjoy the luxury of merely listening. All that summer, on lazy afternoons and long summer nights, the two of us had spent many such hours in the garden; while I read Piso's history of Hannibal, Eco would sit at my feet and watch elephants among the clouds, or he would lie on his back and study the moon while I declaimed the tale of the Sabine women. He understood Greek, strangely enough, though he knew none of the letters. Of late I had been reading to him from an old, tattered scroll of Plato, a cast-off gift from Cicero. Eco followed the subtleties of the philosopher's discourses with fascination, though occasionally in his big brown eyes I saw a glimmer of sorrow that he could never hope to engage in such debates himself.

"Shall I read more Plato, then? They say philosophy after dinner aids digestion."

Eco nodded and ran to fetch the scroll. He emerged from the shadows of the peristyle a moment later, gripping it carefully in his hands. Suddenly he stopped and stood statue-like with a strange expression on his face.

"Eco, what is it?" I thought for a moment that he was ill; Bethesda's fish dumplings and turnips in cumin sauce had been undistinguished, but hardly so bad as to make him sick. He stared straight ahead at nothing and did not hear me.

"Eco? Are you all right?" He stood rigid, trembling; a look which might have been fear or ecstasy crossed his face. Then he sprang toward me, pressed the scroll under my nose, and pointed at it frantically.

"I've never known a boy to be so mad for learning." I laughed, but he was not playing a game. His expression was deadly serious. "But

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Eco, it's only the same volume of Plato that I've been reading to you off and on all summer. Why are you suddenly so excited?"

Eco stood back to perform his pantomime. A dagger thrust into his heart could only indicate the dead Panurgus.

"Panurgus and Plato—Eco, I see no connection."

Eco bit his lip and scrambled about, desperate to express himself. At last he ran into the house and back out again, clutching two objects. He dropped them onto my lap.

"Eco, be careful! This little vase is made of precious green glass, and came all the way from Alexandria. And why have you brought me a bit of red tile? This must have fallen from the roof. . . ."

Eco pointed emphatically at each object in turn, but I could not see what he meant.

He disappeared again and came back with my wax tablet and stylus, upon which he wrote the words for *red* and *green*.

"Yes, Eco, I can see that the vase is green and the tile is red. Blood is red . . ." Eco shook his head and pointed to his eyes. "Panurgus had green eyes . . ." I saw them in my memory, staring lifeless at the sky.

Eco stamped his foot and shook his head to let me know that I was badly off-course. He took the vase and the bit of tile from my lap and began to juggle them from hand to hand.

"Eco, stop that! I told you, the vase is precious!"

He put them carelessly down and reached for the stylus again. He rubbed out the words *red* and *green* and in their place wrote *blue*. It seemed he wished to write another word, but could not think of how to spell it. He nibbled on the stylus and shook his head.

"Eco, I think you must have a fever. You make no sense at all."

He took the scroll from my lap and began to unroll it, scanning it hopelessly. Even if the text had been in Latin it would have been a tortuous job for him to decipher the words and find whatever he was searching for, but the letters were Greek and utterly foreign to him.

He threw down the scroll and began to pantomime again, but he was excited and clumsy; I could make no sense of his wild gesturing. I shrugged and shook my head in exasperation, and Eco suddenly began to weep with frustration. He seized the scroll again and pointed to his eyes. Did he mean that I should read the scroll, or did he point to his tears? I bit my lip and turned up my palms, unable to help him.

Eco threw the scroll in my lap and ran crying from the room. A hoarse, stifled braying issued from his throat, not the sound of nor-

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mal weeping; it tore my heart to hear it. I should have been more patient, but how was I to understand him? Bethesda emerged from the kitchen and gazed at me accusingly, then followed the sound of Eco's weeping to the little room where he slept.

I looked down at the scroll in my lap. There were so many words on the parchment; which ones had keyed an idea in Eco's memory, and what could they have to do with dead Panurgus? *Red, green, blue*—I vaguely remembered reading a passage in which Plato discoursed on the nature of light and color, but I could scarcely remember it, not having understood much of it in the first place. Some scheme about overlapping cones projected from the eyes to an object, or from the object to the eyes, I couldn't remember which; was this what Eco recalled, and could it have made any sense to him?

I rolled through the scroll, looking for the reference, but was unable to find it. My eyes grew weary. The lamp began to sputter. The Greek letters all began to look alike. Normally Bethesda would have come to put me to bed, but it seemed she had chosen to stay with Eco instead. I fell asleep on my dining couch beneath the stars, thinking of a yellow cloak stained with red, and of green eyes gazing at an empty blue sky.

Eco was ill the next day, or feigned illness. Bethesda solemnly informed me that he did not wish to leave his bed. I stood in the doorway of the little room and spoke to him gently, reminding him that the Roman Festival continued, and that today there would be a wild-beast show in the Circus Maximus, and another play put on by another company. He turned his back to me and pulled the coverlet over his head.

"I suppose I should punish him," I whispered to myself, trying to think of what a normal Roman father would do.

"I suppose you should not," whispered Bethesda as she passed me. Her haughtiness left me properly humbled.

I took my morning stroll, alone—for the first time in many days, I realized, acutely aware that Eco was not beside me. The Subura seemed a rather dull place without ten-year-old eyes through which to see it. I had only my own eyes to serve me, and they had seen it a million times before.

I would buy him a gift, I decided; I would buy them each a gift, for it was always a good idea to placate Bethesda when she was haughty. For Eco I bought a red leather ball, such as boys use to play trigon, knocking it back and forth to each other using their

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elbows and knees. For Bethesda I wanted to find a veil woven of blue midnight shot through with fireflies, but I decided to settle for one made of linen. On the street of the cloth merchants I found the shop of my old acquaintance Ruso.

I asked to see a veil of dark blue. As if by magic he produced the very veil I had been imagining, a gossamer thing that seemed to be made of blue-black spiderwebs and silver. It was also the most expensive item in the shop. I chided him for taunting me with a luxury beyond my means.

Ruso shrugged good-naturedly. "One never knows; you might have just won a fortune on a toss of the tiles. Here, these are more affordable." He smiled, laying a selection before me.

"No," I said, seeing nothing I liked, "I've changed my mind."

"Then something in a lighter blue, perhaps? A bright blue, like the sky."

"No, I think not—"

"Ah, but see what I have to show you first. Felix . . . Felix! Fetch me one of the new veils that just arrived from Alexandria, the bright blue ones with yellow stitching."

The young slave bit his lip nervously and seemed to cringe. This struck me as odd, for I knew Ruso to be a temperate man and not a cruel master.

"Go on, then—what are you waiting for?" Ruso turned to me and shook his head. "This new slave—worse than useless! I don't think he's very smart, no matter what the slave merchant said. He keeps the books well enough, but here in the shop—look, he's done it again! Unbelievable! Felix, what is wrong with you? Do you do this just to spite me? Do you want a beating? I won't put up with this any longer, I tell you!"

The slave shrank back, looking confused and helpless. In his hand he held a yellow veil.

"All the time he does this!" wailed Ruso, clutching his head. "He wants to drive me mad! I ask for blue and he brings me yellow! I ask for yellow and he brings me blue! Have you ever heard of such stupidity? I shall beat you, Felix, I swear it!" And he ran after the poor slave, brandishing a measuring rod.

And then I understood.

My friend Statilius, as I had expected, was not at his lodgings in the Subura. When I questioned his landlord, the old man gave me the sly look of a confederate charged with throwing hounds off the

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scent, and told me that Statilius had left Rome for the countryside.

He was in none of the usual places where he might have been on a festival day. No tavern had served him and no brothel had admitted him. He would not even think of appearing in a gambling house, I told myself—and then knew that the exact opposite must be true.

Once I set to searching the gaming places in the Subura, I found him easily enough. In a crowded apartment on the third floor of an old tenement I discovered him in the midst of a crowd of well-dressed men, some of them even wearing their togas. Statilius was down on his elbows and knees, shaking a tiny box and muttering prayers to Fortune. He cast the tiles; the crowd contracted in a tight circle and then drew back, exclaiming. The tiles had come up two black, two white.

"Yes! Yes!" Statilius cried, and held out his palms. The others handed over their coins.

I grabbed him by the collar of his tunic and pulled him squawking into the hall.

"I should think you're deeply enough in debt already," I said.

"Quite the contrary!" he protested, smiling broadly. His face was flushed and his forehead beaded with sweat, like a man with a fever.

"Just how much *do* you owe Flavius the moneylender?"

"A hundred thousand sesterces."

"A hundred thousand!" My heart leaped into my throat.

"But not any longer. You see, I'll be able to pay him off now!" He held up the coins in his hands. "I have two bags full of silver in the other room, where my slave's looking after them. And—can you believe it?—a deed to a house on the Caelian Hill. I've won my way out of it, don't you see?"

"At the expense of another man's life."

His grin became sheepish. "So, you've figured that out. But who could have foreseen such a tragedy? Certainly not I. And when it happened, I didn't rejoice in Panurgus's death—you saw that. I didn't hate him, not really. My jealousy was purely professional. But if the Fates decided better him than me, who am I to argue?"

"You're a worm, Statilius. Why didn't you tell Roscius what you knew? Why didn't you tell me?"

"What did I know, really? Someone completely unknown might have killed poor Panurgus. I didn't witness the event."

"But you guessed the truth, all the same. That's why you wanted me backstage, wasn't it? You were afraid the assassin would come back for you. What was I, your bodyguard?"

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"Perhaps. After all, he didn't come back, did he?"

"Statilius, you're a worm."

"You said that already." The smile dropped from his face like a discarded mask. He jerked his collar from my grasp.

"You hid the truth from me," I said, "but why from Roscius?"

"What, tell him I had run up an obscene gambling debt for which a notorious moneylender was threatening to kill me?"

"Perhaps he'd have loaned you the money."

"Never! You don't know Roscius. I was lucky to be in his troupe to begin with; he's not the type to hand out favors to an underling in the amount of a hundred thousand sesterces. And if he knew Panurgus had mistakenly been murdered instead of me—oh, Roscius would have loved that! One Panurgus is worth ten Statilii, that's his view. I *would* have been a dead man then, with Flavius on one side and Roscius on the other. The two of them would have torn me apart like a chicken bone!" He stepped back and straightened his tunic. The smile flickered and returned to his lips. "You're not going to tell anyone, are you?"

"Statilius, do you ever stop acting?" I averted my eyes to avoid his charm.

"Well?"

"Roscius is my client, not you."

"But I'm your friend, Gordianus."

"I made a promise to Panurgus."

"Panurgus didn't hear you."

"The gods did."

Finding the moneylender Flavius was a simpler matter—a few questions in the right ear, a few coins in the right hands. I learned that he owned a wine shop in a portico near the Circus Flaminius, where he sold inferior vintages imported from his native Tarquinii. But on a festival day, my informants told me, I would be more likely to find him at the house of questionable repute across the street.

The place had a low ceiling and the musty smell of spilled wine and crowded humanity. Across the room I saw Flavius, holding court with a group of his peers—businessmen of middle age with crude country manners, dressed in expensive tunics and cloaks of a quality that only emphasized their wearers' crudeness. Closer at hand, leaning against a wall (and looking strong enough to hold it up), was the moneylender's bully.

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The blond giant was looking rather drunk, or else exceptionally stupid. He slowly blinked when I approached. A glimmer of recognition lit his bleary eyes and then faded.

"Festival days are good drinking days," I said, raising my cup of wine. He looked at me without expression for a moment, then shrugged and nodded.

"Tell me," I said, "do you know any of those spectacular beauties?" I gestured to a group of four women who loitered at the far corner of the room, near the foot of the stairs.

The giant shook his head glumly.

"Then you are a lucky man this day." I leaned close enough to smell the wine on his breath. "I was just talking to one of them. She tells me that she longs to meet you. It seems she has an appetite for men with sunny hair and big shoulders. She tells me that for a man such as you . . ." I whispered in his ear.

The veil of lust across his face made him look even stupider. He squinted drunkenly. "Which one?" he asked in a husky whisper.

"The one in the blue gown," I said.

"Ah . . ." He nodded and burped, then pushed past me and stumbled toward the stairs. As I expected, he ignored the woman in green, as well as the woman in coral and the one in brown. Instead he placed his hand squarely upon the hip of the woman in yellow, who turned and looked up at him with a startled but not unfriendly gaze.

"Quintus Roscius and his partner Chaerea were both duly impressed by my cleverness," I explained later that night to Bethesda. I was unable to resist the theatrical gesture of swinging the little bag of silver up in the air and onto the table, where it landed with a jingling thump. "Not a pot of gold, perhaps, but a fat enough fee to keep us all happy through the winter."

Her eyes became as round and glittering as little coins. They grew even larger when I produced the veil from Ruso's shop.

"Oh! But what is it made of?"

"Midnight and fireflies," I said. "Spiderwebs and silver." She tilted her head back and spread the translucent veil over her naked throat and arms. I blinked and swallowed hard, and decided that the purchase was well worth the price.

Eco stood uncertainly in the doorway of his little room, where he had watched me enter and had listened to my hurried tale of the day's events. He seemed to have recovered from his distemper of

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the morning, but his face was somber. I held out my hand, and he cautiously approached. He took the leather ball readily enough, but he still did not smile.

"Only a small gift, I know. But I have a greater one for you. . . ."

"Still, I don't understand," protested Bethesda. "You've said the blond giant was stupid, but how can anyone be so stupid as not to be able to tell one color from another?"

"Eco knows," I said, smiling ruefully down at him. "He figured it out last night and tried to tell me, but he didn't know how. He remembered a passage from Plato that I read to him months ago; I had forgotten all about it. Here, I think I can find it now." I reached for the scroll, which still lay upon my sleeping couch.

" 'One may observe,' " I read aloud, " 'that not all men perceive the same colors. Although they are rare, there are those who confuse the colors red and green, and likewise those who cannot tell yellow from blue; still others appear to have no perception of the various shades of green.' He goes on to offer an explanation of this, but I cannot follow it."

"Then the bodyguard could not tell blue from yellow?" said Bethesda. "Even so . . ."

"Flavius came to the theater yesterday intending to make good on his threat to murder Statilius. No wonder he gave a start when I leaned over and said, 'Today you'll see *The Pot of Gold*'—for a moment he thought I meant the debt Statilius owed him! He sat in the audience long enough to see that Statilius was playing Megadorus, dressed in blue; no doubt he could recognize him by his voice. Then he sent the assassin backstage, knowing the alley behind the Temple of Jupiter would be virtually deserted, there to lie in wait for the actor *in the blue cloak*. Eco must have overheard snatches of his instructions, if only the word 'blue.' He thought that something was amiss and tried to tell me at the time, but there was too much confusion, with the giant stepping on my toes and the audience howling around us. Am I right?"

Eco nodded, and slapped a fist against his palm: exactly right.

"Unfortunately for poor Panurgus in his yellow cloak, the assassin is also uncommonly stupid. He needed more information than the color blue to make sure he murdered the right man, but he didn't bother to ask for it; or if he did, Flavius must only have sneered at him and rushed him along, unable to understand his confusion. Catching Panurgus alone and vulnerable in his yellow cloak, which might as well have been blue, the assassin did his job—and bungled it.

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"Knowing Flavius was in the audience and out to kill him, learning that Panurgus had been stabbed, and seeing that the hired assassin was no longer in the audience, Statilius guessed the truth; no wonder he was so shaken by Panurgus's death, knowing that he was the intended victim."

"So another slave is murdered, and by accident! And nothing will be done," Bethesda said moodily.

"Not exactly. Panurgus was valuable property. The law allows his owners to sue the man responsible for his death for his full market value. I understand that Roscius and Chaerea are each demanding one hundred thousand sesterces from Flavius. If Flavius contests the action and loses, the amount will be double. Knowing his greed, I suspect he'll tacitly admit his guilt and settle for the smaller figure."

"Small justice for a meaningless murder."

I nodded. "And small recompense for the destruction of so much talent. But such is the only justice that Roman law allows, when a citizen kills a slave."

A heavy silence descended on the garden. His insight vindicated, Eco turned his attention to the leather ball. He tossed it in the air, caught it, and nodded thoughtfully, satisfied at the way it fit his hand.

"Ah, but Eco, as I was saying, there is another gift for you." He looked at me expectantly. "It's here." I patted the sack of silver. "No longer shall I teach you in my own stumbling way how to read and write. You shall have a proper tutor, who will come every morning to teach you both Latin and Greek. He will be stern, and you shall suffer, but when he is done you will read and write better than I do. A boy as clever as you deserves no less."

Eco's smile was radiant. I have never seen a boy toss a ball so high.

The story is almost done, except for one final outcome.

Much later that night, I lay in bed with Bethesda with nothing to separate us but a gossamer veil shot through with silver threads. For a few fleeting moments I was completely satisfied with life and the universe. In my relaxation, without meaning to, I mumbled what I was thinking. "Perhaps I *should* adopt the boy," I muttered.

"And why not?" Bethesda demanded, imperious even when half-asleep. "What more proof do you want from him? The boy could not be more like your son if he were made of your own flesh and blood."

And of course, she was right. ●

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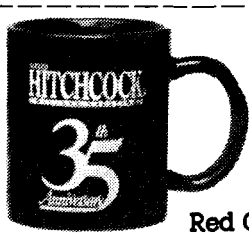

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a ***NEW*** short story by

HENRY SLESAR

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A LETTER TOO LATE

by HENRY SLESAR

"I insulted a nun this morning," Penny said to the ceiling of Dr. Winterich's office. Then she laughed, one of her sharp dry laughs that always made the doctor stab his pad with the point of his pen. "I wonder if it's bad luck, to insult a nun."

He waited for details. Winterich was a strict Freudian, who believed in the sanctity of free association. Eventually, he found out that the nun had been collecting money for some religious charity, and in Penny's depressed mood she had literally slammed the door in her face. The doctor scribbled a parenthetical note. *"Temp. outb. incr. freq."*

Penny was already aware of the recent escalation of her angry moods, but she had no trouble determining its cause.

"Why shouldn't I be upset?" she demanded. "This damned cruise is for *eight weeks!* Mike's never been gone more than three or four. He told me himself he hates the long ones. The passengers are much more trouble—"

"Why is that?" Winterich said, with genuine curiosity.

"Because they're older. Ancient, some of them. Only older people can afford the time and money for these long cruises. Do you know they actually bring *coffins* aboard? They're kept in the hold, just in case anyone dies on the voyage. Doesn't that make your flesh creep?"

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"Has he left yet?"

"No. The ship sails this evening." She giggled suddenly. "Maybe I ought to do what I did the last time. The South Pacific cruise." She turned her head, but Winterich always stationed himself out of her line of sight.

"What did you do then?"

"I thought you knew." Then she remembered—Mamie Vogel had been her doctor at the time. Obviously, she hadn't turned over her notes to Winterich when Penny switched analysts. "I cut up his uniform, with scissors. Of course it was a childish thing to do." But she smiled at the recollection. Mike's face floated down from the ceiling, wearing an expression of fury and petulance.

"And what happened when you did?"

"He missed the sailing. He had to get a new purser's uniform fitted, so he flew down to Fiji and picked up the ship there. Of course we had a major, major fight about it. But that's one good thing about having a sailor for a husband, he's away so long we have plenty of time for our tempers to cool down."

"And your temper right now?"

Penny was amused. Winterich was getting positively loquacious.

"I'm glad he's going. I mean it. I've been thinking about it ever since he told me. Eight weeks! I couldn't be happier. I'm going to have the whole damned apartment painted. My friend Nan is going to Europe for a month, so I'll be able to stay at her place during the worst part of it. . . . I might even have the furniture upholstered. I know what you're going to say. Does Mike know about all the money I'm going to spend? No, I want that to be a fun surprise for him when he gets back."

Winterich said nothing, disappointing her.

"Do you think I'm wrong? Do you think I'm just being spiteful? Oh, I know. You won't make any judgments. That's fine with me. I left Dr. Vogel because she made too many judgments."

"Was that really the reason?"

"What do you mean?"

"Dr. Vogel suggested that you and she reached some sort of impasse. That you came to a bridge that you refused to cross."

"So she *did* turn over her notes!"

"We had a brief professional consultation," Winterich said easily. "It was in your best interest. She seems to think that you ended your therapy when a certain subject surfaced. A man called Gordon."

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Penny tried hard not to react to Winterich's thrust by remaining perfectly still. But the act of immobilizing herself was in itself a giveaway. She shot a look at her watch and then sat up.

"I know it's ten minutes early," she said. "But I want to get home before Mike leaves." She tried to twinkle at him. "I have to wish him Bon Voyage, don't I?"

There was no trace of the twinkle by the time she reached the parking lot behind Winterich's building. It was replaced by a bothersome twitch in her left eye, a symptom so familiar that she simply ignored it. But she couldn't ignore the trembling in both hands when she placed them on the wheel. She tried to steady them by tightening her grip, but the effort failed. She decided to sit quietly and wait until the tremors passed, until she was in control again. "Control" was an important word to Penny, possibly because she was always balanced on its thin edge, looking down into a swirling chaos.

Why did he have to mention Gordon?

She leaned back and closed her eyes, expecting memory to develop a photographic image of Gordon Cates. But she saw only darkness. She would have to delineate the face for herself, feature by feature. The deep-set eyes, sea-glass green. The patrician nose. The thin wide mouth, the twisty little smile he used a bit too deliberately. The straight blue-black hair, grown too long. She had tried to cut it once while he slept. Samson and Delilah. He hadn't laughed. He had torn the scissors from her hand and flung them across the room. Scissors again. She had to plead for his forgiveness, and he bestowed it like a Roman Emperor. He was almost preposterous in his haughty indignation, but Penny loved him all the more for it.

Dear God, she thought, how long ago that seemed! But it was only a year and a half. With a little effort, she could probably name the exact date. All she would have to do is count backwards from the night Mike Wharton asked her to marry him. The chronology of pain. She visualized a calendar, pages falling off like an old movie sequence. Her hands began to steady on the wheel. She turned on the ignition.

They had been a threesome. That was the word everyone used. Nan, not long on originality, had called them the "gleesome threesome." At the beginning, of course, they were four, the fourth being Nan herself. She was Mike's cousin, distant in more ways than one she used to say. Nan had a sisterly interest in seeing Mike happily paired off, and her friend Penny seemed like a logical candidate, even if she deplored Penny's occasional lapses into moodiness. Mike

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was easygoing enough for both of them. She described Mike as "breezy," and the word suited him. You could always picture Mike on an open boat, his thin blond hair lifting in the wind, smiling with small perfect teeth at an unseen horizon.

Penny had liked Mike from the first, and liked him even more when he introduced her to his best friend. The very fact that Mike could have a friend like Gordon Cates impressed her. Gordon seemed so remote, so impervious to friendship; she equated these qualities with superior standards. Gordon was an assistant editor in a publishing house, and he exuded an intellectual aura that Penny found stimulating even though she hadn't read a book all the way through since leaving college. That changed when she met Gordon, who always remembered to bring a purloined novel from his office when the gleesome threesome met—by this time, Nan had detached herself from the group.

To anyone seeing them together, it was quickly apparent which way the sexual current was flowing. Penny tried to divide her attention equally, but the quality of the attention was different. She flirted more openly with Mike, teased and tantalized him. But when she turned to Gordon, her large brown eyes seemed to melt like heated chocolate. If he touched her arm, it would quiver like the withers of a horse. Penny was passably pretty, but when she looked at Gordon Cates her complexion would become luminescent, highlights would glisten in her hair, her very features would alter into something approaching an Athenian ideal. She seemed to make herself over each time, in her desire to please him.

The trouble was, her transformation seemed to affect Mike more than it did his friend. Fortunately, he never objected when Penny suggested that Gordon be included in their twice-weekly dates. He seemed to enjoy the chase even more because Gordon was its spectator. He never realized that the glow she radiated on those Wednesday and Saturday evenings wasn't meant for him alone. Poor Mike! His innocence was touching. Remembering those days, Penny felt sorry for him all over again, and almost lost the hard edge of the anger she had been feeling for the past week.

She had thought it was going to be Gordon who would finally put an end to the gleesome threesome. She had seen the signs of his discontent when Penny became a weekend visitor to the beach house the two friends shared every summer. She had arrived with her arms laden with cookbooks and copper frying pans and cleansing powder. She knew Mike and Gordon were both helpless in the

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kitchen and indifferent to domestic hygiene. She cooked and scrubbed and sewed all weekend, and reveled in it. At night, with linked arms, they would stride down the beach towards somebody's cookout or cocktail party. Both Mike and Gordon would drink copious amounts of alcohol, but only Mike seemed to get drunk, and she and Gordon would have to put him to bed, giggling like dormitory conspirators. One night, after a party, they had looked down at his comatose form like parents fondly regarding a wayward child. Gordon had turned to her and gathered her into his arms. She had known a dozen of Mike's kisses to that point, but this one, almost solemn and ceremonial, meant more to her than the total of them all.

Gordon didn't mention the event the next day. But it had changed the barometric pressure at the beach house. His mood was sullen, faintly hostile. He seemed to resent his role as designated spectator to Mike's romance. He looked on at Mike's clowny, clumsy flirtations with Penny with open resentment. It made her heart race, her blood accelerate through her veins. She found herself stoking the furnace of his jealousy. She was more than usually amorous with Mike. She sat on his lap at the breakfast table and gave him an overheated kiss, and it lasted too long for Gordon's patience. He slammed down his cup and declared that he was going for a swim. Mike would have been a block of wood not to recognize his distaste, and he went running after him. Penny sat alone, in simmering satisfaction.

Then came the *Laguna Queen.* It was a berth Mike had been wanting for almost a year, ever since he had been discharged from the navy. Mike had fallen in love with the ocean; he wanted to continue his career on the water, but he didn't want to be an ordinary deck hand on a commercial vessel. He was a college graduate, he had been a petty officer, and he loved handsome uniforms. On the *Laguna Queen,* he could wear gleaming whites and gold braid, and there was no way he could turn down the offer, not even if it meant a three-week intermission in his courtship.

In the rear-view mirror, Penny saw her own unconscious smile. She was thinking about the night of the sailing. She was hearing Mike's voice, telling Gordon to "take good care of Penny" in his absence. She had watched Gordon's face, wondering if he was pitying Mike's naiveté. She had been afraid that her own expression would reveal her excited anticipation so she had begged off early, claiming a cooking class, leaving Mike and Gordon to their bon voyages.

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It had taken three days for Gordon to call her, and Penny had to be the one to suggest dinner. They went to their favorite Italian restaurant in the Village, and their favorite Italian waiter, who was actually Dominican, was surprised to seat them at a table for two. They drank their initial toast to Admiral Mike. There were three other toasts after that, and Penny was drunk for the first time since the formation of the gleesome threesome. Gordon had to take her home, and had to extricate himself from her drunken embrace. She remembered dragging him towards her bed, and how firmly he had resisted, and how scrambled her feelings had been, mixing resentment of his rejection and admiration for his chivalry.

Gordon didn't call for a week after that, and Penny had to instigate the next encounter herself. She did it brazenly, reminding him of his promise to Mike. He took her to dinner, and she had a chaste glass of white wine, and afterward they went to a movie and sat stiffly side by side, until her hand "accidentally" brushed his, and then their fingers locked. . . .

The day before the *Laguna Queen* was due back in port, Penny received her first postcard, from St. Croix. She crammed it into her purse without even bothering to decipher Mike's scrawl and went to Gordon's apartment. He was in his shirtsleeves, immersed in the galleys of a book; she had never seen him wear reading glasses before, and the sight of them perched on his patrician nose made her heart quicken. She showed him the postcard, and he promptly showed her the one he had just received himself, equally illegible. They smiled at each other, once more like indulgent parents. Then she sank to her knees in front of his desk chair and put her arms around him. Her kiss began as solemnly as their first, but it turned into a hungry exploration. They were off balance and slid from the chair to the carpet, and the length of their bodies met. His glasses were askew. She lifted them off and kissed him again.

Penny had been surprised when Gordon didn't show up at the pier the next morning to greet the arriving cruise ship. It made her all the more anxious about seeing Mike again. Then he was on the gangplank, a dashing figure in his white uniform, waving his braided cap. She ran to meet him, and he kissed her loudly, laughing for no particular reason. When he asked for Gordon, she could only claim mystification at his absence, and Mike's tanned face momentarily clouded. "Maybe it was the postcard," he said. When she confessed to an inability to read his message, Mike said: "I've signed on for another cruise—the Mediterranean. Isn't that terrific?"

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That was how the threesome ended. Mike's decision to pursue a career at sea created a rift between him and his landlocked, desk-locked friend. She thought it might affect her own relationship (ship's officers were notoriously catnip to vacationing females) but Mike had no intention of letting that happen. On the night before he embarked on his third cruise, he took her to dinner (that same Italian restaurant, the same Dominican waiter) and proposed marriage. The linguine turned cold and pasty on her plate as she stared at it, not knowing what to say, thinking of Gordon. Mike didn't rush her decision. Cheerfully, he said the cruise was a short one; her answer could wait for his return.

She called Gordon the next day, at his office. Her heart constricted when she learned that he was at the Book Fair in Frankfurt, and wouldn't return for another six days.

She cajoled a secretary into giving her the travel schedule and drove out to the airport to meet Gordon's plane. Later, she would blame herself for being overanxious, for demonstrating too much concern. It was an aggressiveness that would have delighted Mike, but Gordon wasn't Mike (and wasn't that the reason she loved him?). He was not only surprised to see her at the terminal, he was openly disgruntled. He accepted the lift back into the city, but his mood didn't permit her to come to the point of her mission.

Gordon's disposition improved by the time they reached the city. He apologized. He admitted that he was still feeling the aches and pains of his amputated friendship, and seeing "Mike's girl" was an unhappy reminder. It was then that she told him that she wasn't "Mike's girl" if he didn't want her to be. She could be "Gordon's girl" if he asked her to be. It came out so coquettishly, so charmlessly, that Penny regretted it the moment the words escaped her lips. She wished she could recapture the sentence, play it back in a different key, but it was too late. Gordon thanked her for the offer with an irony that was like the cold blade of a knife twisting in her body. She should have laughed. She should have left. She should have done anything but what she did. She told him about Mike's proposal. She warned him that she was tempted to accept it. When he failed to make a conciliatory reply, she raised her voice in anger and said that she had just made up her mind to say yes. Then she walked out and drove away, barely able to see the road. She got home safely, living proof that God protects sleepwalkers, drunkards, and the disappointed.

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Mike's ship docked two days later, and he had somehow managed (radiogram?) to have a lavish bouquet of red and yellow roses delivered before his arrival. The enclosed card bore a simple question mark. She felt the onset of panic, and without thinking, dialed Gordon's office number. He was in a meeting. His secretary would take a message. "No message," Penny had answered. Her doorbell rang, and she hung up.

Mike had brought a bottle of champagne, pilfered from the ship. Penny wasn't used to champagne. She didn't object as Mike filled glass after glass. After a while, his face began to float towards her. His small white teeth were bared in a smile. His breath was on her neck, and he was whispering in her ear. She whispered something, too, and woke up the next morning with the realization that she had agreed to marry him.

When she saw her eyes in the bathroom mirror, she knew she couldn't confront Gordon that day. But she managed to reach him by phone, and she told him, casually, that she and Mike were engaged. He didn't pause very long before replying.

"Congratulations," he said. "I hope you're both very happy."

She didn't remember who disconnected first.

Penny didn't marry Mike until almost two months later. There were four more cruise jobs in between; he was traveling so much that he had given up his small Village apartment. He moved into Penny's even smaller quarters, where they played house until fall. Gordon went to the beach cottage alone. When Penny and Mike finally married, in a civil ceremony, the best man was Mike's brother-in-law. Gordon, invited, never showed up.

There was a garment bag hanging on the front doorknob. She had begged the building super not to expose her dry cleaning to the world, but he never listened. She brought the bag inside, and its weight told her that the contents belonged to her husband. She parted the zipper, and saw the gleam of gold braid against cottony white. She flung the bag over an armchair, but then relented. She slipped off the black plastic bag, and hung the uniform on the hall closet door.

There was a business card on the dining table, a rainbow arching out of a paint can. She put the card into her purse. She hadn't told Mike about her appointment with the painter tomorrow morning.

The living room was going to be celadon green. The kitchen would be white with yellow trim. The bedroom—but she hadn't decided on

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the bedroom color. The den, the room Mike considered "his," was going to be a pale shade of mauve to go with the carpet. Mike wouldn't have approved any of her choices. He liked either white or blue, navy colors, but Mike wasn't going to be there, and he would have to get used to her choices. If he didn't—too bad! She was the one who stayed home.

Penny went from room to room, imagining them transformed by their new colors.

She was about to leave the den when she observed something different about Mike's desk. At first, she wasn't sure what the difference was. It was the same well-polished walnut cube Mike had brought to the marriage from the first apartment they shared together. Mike relished its neat drawers and the perfect trim of its files. He was also scrupulous about locking every drawer. The fact had never made her curious. Her husband wasn't a man she expected to have secrets.

Then she realized what it was. The bottom left-hand drawer was out of alignment. Mike had forgotten to lock it. If she was in a prying mood, the opportunity had arrived. What the hell, Penny thought.

She opened the drawer and saw a neat array of folders. Each was labeled in block letters. BANK. LAUNDRY. GROCERIES. AUTO. Half a dozen more. For a moment, she thought about labeling a blank folder WIFE. She found one in the rear of the drawer, but decided Mike wouldn't be amused. Then she realized the blank folder wasn't empty. There was a letter in it, without an envelope. There was also something familiar about the stationery. It bore the antique imprint of a large letter "G" with a tiny elf sitting on the crossbar. Penny always thought it was a bit too coy for Gordon's personality, but he seemed to like it.

She opened the letter. It was undated, it was handwritten, and from the first words, she knew why Mike had hidden it from her.

My darling, it read.

My darling, when you told me about your engagement I know I must have seemed completely indifferent. The truth is I was in so much pain that I couldn't speak—I couldn't find words. Now I know how those poor authors I'm always maligning must feel—I know this isn't what you want—I know you'll regret it. That's why I'm asking you, begging you, not to go through with this marriage. If it's still not too late, please come to me—call me—I'll be waiting to hear from you—

It was signed: *Gordon.*

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Penny had never screamed in her life. Even as a child, she had sulked away her rages. If her throat hadn't constricted, she would have screamed now. If she could have made her paralyzed muscles move, she would have broken things, smashed dishes, shattered glass. But there was no release. She sat down, she buried her head in her lap, she tried to think. The letter had come to her old apartment, of course. Maybe only a few days after she spoke to Gordon, maybe even a week later. Whenever it was, Mike had seen it first. Mike had seen the elf-ridden monogram Gordon used even on his envelopes. Mike had opened her letter and read Gordon's words. Maybe they didn't surprise him. Maybe he had always known there was something between Penny and his best friend. . . . Yes, of course he had! She was sure of it now. Mike was naive, but he wasn't blind! He must have seen it, he may even have relished it; wasn't there some special secret pleasure in outdoing your best friend? But he hadn't taken the risk of letting Penny see it. He had hidden the truth of Gordon's feelings from her. And then he had stored away this delicious souvenir, this trophy of his victory. . . .

And what had Gordon done? When there had been no answer? No phone call, no visit, no response of any kind? He had done nothing, of course. He had swallowed the bitterness he must have felt; he had shuttered up his resentment. They had seen him only once since, and that encounter had been a chance meeting in a restaurant. Gordon had nodded at them with a cool pretense of cordiality, but Penny thought there was another message in his green eyes. She looked at the letter again and knew what that message must have been. She was an expert in sulking rage.

But then her own fury took another form. She looked up and saw the nautical uniform hanging on the closet door. It was as if Mike was in front of her, looking down at her anguish with breezy amusement. She stood up quickly and scurried into the bedroom. She scrambled among a welter of objects on her dressing table until she found the sewing scissors she rarely used. She returned to the living room and with a strangled cry attacked the white and gold uniform by stabbing at the breast pocket as if Mike's heart had been underneath. Despite the strength of her anger, the crisp material resisted the thrust. She opened the scissors and went to work on the lining, shredding it rapidly. She managed to cut through the threads of the pockets and used her fingers to rip them into hanging flaps. She was slitting one of the trouser legs when the front door opened and Mike walked in, gripping a paper bag by twine handles. When he saw

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her, he dropped the bag and a pair of newly resoled shoes bounced on the floor.

"Stop it, Penny! For God's sake—"

He tried to seize her wrist, to halt the mayhem, but she pulled away, fighting him off with her free hand. She heard herself shouting words in a disjointed sentence, but Mike wasn't listening; he was desperately trying to save his precious uniform. She swung at it again with the closed scissors, not expecting him to defend it with his body. The points penetrated his blue cotton shirt, embedded themselves so effortlessly into the upper part of his chest that Penny barely felt the impact. He gave her a questioning look. She released the scissors, but they didn't fall, they remained incongruously in place. There was no blood. Mike didn't even cry out. He coughed, putting his fist to his mouth, and his legs buckled. He lifted his right hand to touch the chrome handles and sank to his knees, like a man in prayer. Penny was going to help him up, when she realized that all she really wanted to do was get out of the apartment, into the street, into as much noise and bustle as possible. She didn't rush out. She had the presence of mind to take her purse and carefully put Gordon's letter inside.

She didn't remember entering the phone booth. For a moment, she considered dialing the police emergency number, but when she lifted the receiver the three digits she actually dialed were for directory assistance. Her voice was calm when she asked the operator for Gordon's number. She was surprised when she recognized it. She had assumed Gordon had moved in the past two years, since everything else about her life had changed. But the number was the same, and presumably so was the address. She hailed a cab and recited it to the driver. Then she leaned against the back seat cushion and waited for the next event.

Gordon lived in a brownstone next door to a small grocery with a massive outdoor fruit stand. She pushed the button next to his nameplate and there was an answering buzz that unlocked the heavy front door. It was as if Gordon was expecting her. She climbed two flights of stairs that sagged in exactly the same old way, and she sniffed the same familiar cooking smells she had smelled two years ago.

She had no idea what she was going to say when Gordon answered his doorbell. He would be surprised, of course; his green eyes would change, and she would look for clues in their sea-glass depths. She wasn't sure she would tell him what happened between her and

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Mike, or seek his help. Her first priority was to tell Gordon the truth, for him to know that his letter reached her too late, to find out if there was still time to give the answer that should have reached him eighteen months ago.

He opened the door, and she couldn't read anything in his eyes. Gordon was wearing tinted glasses. But she knew he was stricken by the sight of her. He was immobilized. He seemed to be looking over her shoulder into the hallway. That was when she realized he must have been expecting someone else, someone who didn't require identification, someone who might even be living there. It was the first question she asked, even before he invited her inside.

"Yes," Gordon said. "I was expecting someone. But it's all right."

He closed the door and waited.

"I came because of this," Penny said. When she opened her purse and extracted the folded sheet of his stationery, Gordon removed his glasses. His eyes looked tired.

"What is this, Penny?" he asked.

"A letter," Penny said. "Your letter." She suddenly discovered that she could smile. "The mail is really terrible in this town, isn't it? It took eighteen months to get to me."

Gordon was about to take the letter from her when the door buzzer sounded from below. The expected visitor had arrived, but Gordon hesitated before responding. When the delay became extended, the buzzer sounded again and a thin, toneless voice crackled out of the speaker.

"Don't play games, Gordon! I said I was sorry, didn't I?"

Penny looked at him, and Gordon's lips tightened. Then he pushed the button that would unlock the door once more.

"It's my roommate," he said.

Penny began watching the door, forgetting the letter still in her hand. There was no doorbell this time. The new arrival had a key. He walked in, but halted in the doorway, posing with one hand on his narrow hip. He wore blue jeans, a grey sports shirt with a red vest, and a diamond earring. He was holding a gift-wrapped box, balanced on his fingertips like a waiter bearing a tray.

"Chocolate nut clusters," he said. "If that won't make you kiss and make up, you can go to hell—bitch."

He smiled engagingly. Then he noticed Penny for the first time, and the smile wobbled.

"Who's your friend?" he asked.

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"I was just leaving," Penny said, moving to the door. "I just dropped in to say hello," she told him. Then she was outside the door and racing down the stairs, ignoring the loose steps, stumbling over the tattered carpet in the front hallway. She was on the street before she remembered that she was still clutching Gordon's letter. She hurled it into a wire wastebasket, not caring that it wasn't her property to discard, that it had been Mike's letter all along.

ON OUR COVER

Best known for his portrayal of Jeremy Hunter on ABC's *All My Children,* Jean LeClerc has a long list of credits not only in television and film, but in the classical theatre. He has toured in productions of Shakespeare, Chekhov, and O'Neill, performing in such plays as "Waiting for Godot" at the National Art Theatre in Ottawa, for which he won the Fleur de Lys Award for Best Actor; "A Lion in Winter," which earned him the Fleur De Lys Award for Best Supporting Actor; "Beckett," at the Rideau Vert in Montreal; and "Man and His World" at the 1967 World's Fair.

The second of five children, Mr. LeClerc was born and raised in Montreal. His father hoped he would pursue a career in medicine, but to his dismay (and soap fans' delight) his son turned to acting. "I never took an acting class," LeClerc says. "I learned by doing and one role led to the next."

After appearing in a New York production of "Dracula," the actor fell in love with New York City and shortly thereafter moved to the United States, where he guest-starred in such television series as *T.J. Hooker, The Greatest American Hero,* and *The Devlin Connection* before landing the role on *All My Children.*

Mr. LeClerc maintains two residences, one on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, the other in Montreal. For relaxation, he likes to restore antique furniture and historic homes—his own home in Montreal is an eighteenth century flour mill which he restored himself.

The actor is also a mystery fan. Asked what he likes about the character with whom he is most closely associated, tall, dark Jeremy Hunter, he says, "I like the mystery about him!"

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a *NEW* short story by

TERRY MULLINS

"Here's something they missed." Furr pulled out a square fireproof metal box. "That flat key on the ring made me think there might be something like this around," he said. He put the heavy box on the bed, unlocked it with the flat key, and opened it. There were jewels, a box of old coins, a complete set of antique silver flatware, and several dozen gold chains. . . .

WHEN THE BELL WAS SILENT

by TERRY MULLINS

The bell had rung at two minutes past eight that night. There was no doubt about that. Neighbors living near the school had grown used to it. Some even pointed to the bell tower with a certain pride. If they lived within three blocks of the school, they heard the bell. And dozens said they heard it that night.

It had not rung for nine. At least three persons who lived next to the school had commented at the time that the bell was broken again.

At ten-thirty the night watchman found the bodies of the Baryla brothers on the second floor of the school Administration Building. The bell lay on top of Jerzy. He had been shot in the back of the head. Beside him lay Eugene shot through the heart. A gun lay beside them. Their pickup truck stood in front of the building, keys in the ignition.

Detective Furr studied the night watchman while police technicians examined, photographed, and removed the bodies. The night watchman was stocky, middle aged, overweight, pale as skim milk, and obviously shaken. He gave his name as Ed Harinson. His beard, short cropped to a point and clean shaved above the mouth, gave

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him a Semitic appearance. He said he lived on the premises.

Furr addressed him for the third time. "You said you didn't know them. Now you say they were regular drinking companions of yours."

"They was juss two bodies on the floor. I juss saw them lying there and I didn't know who they was. When you said that wallet said Eugene Baryla, I seen who they was."

"Didn't you recognize their truck?"

"No. I never seen it before. They juss come into the bar off of the street like me. They're juss two guys I drink and talk with."

"When was the last time you saw them?"

"Toosday night. They come in juss after me and Jake. They and me and Jake drank and talked for two, three hours. Then they left."

"Did they say where they were going?"

"Said they was going to Sheba's"

"Who's Sheba?"

"Some woman they know. They was always talking about her."

"And you never saw either of them outside the bar?"

"Never."

"But you did a lot of talking in the bar. What about?"

"The usual things: bowling, Atlantic City, the city's lousy politicians, weather."

"Women?"

"They talked about Sheba. Then they kidded Jake about his wife having a baby so late on. She's forty and Jake's forty-eight. Their oldest is married and having a baby of his own. We're all sort of rough on Jake but he takes it in stride."

"Did you ever talk about your work?"

"Yeh. Last Toosday they asked me lots of questions about where I work and what I do."

"And you told them?"

"We talked a lot about where I work and what I do. They was interested."

"I'll bet they were. Did they ever talk about themselves, their business?"

"They talked some about theirselves, mostly about them and Sheba. They work for a man named Taddy. He's a second-hand dealer."

"You told them about the bell?"

"Yeh. We juss had the bell fixt. It was all screwed up. It rung all time of day, juss kept on and on. Mr. Wickin said the bell was worth

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too much to have some lecktrick switch beat the hell out of it, so we had it fixt real quick—but it made an awful fuss before we fixt it."

Furr asked more questions, got Jake's name and some idea of where to find him, then let Harinson go. Primrose Wicki, superintendent of the school, was away for the weekend. Harinson and his wife were the only persons on the grounds.

Furr and his partner, Tim Respil, drove to the bar where Harinson did his drinking. As they entered, they were conscious of a dim room to their right half filled with customers. They were all men, blue-collar workers who looked as if they belonged there, some who looked as if they never really belonged anywhere else.

To their left was a long, damp bar. A red and blue neon sign advertised Budweiser. Dim lamps along the walls illuminated older beer ads for Schaefer and Ballantine. Behind the bartender was a shelf filled with liquor bottles. There were no bottles of wine or cordial. Presumably those were under the counter gathering dust. The sickening smell of stale tobacco blended with the stronger smell of fresh beer.

A steady rumble of men's voices was broken from time to time by a burst of laughter. The place seemed pervaded by a deep mood of satisfied discontent, as if life had verified their worst predictions and left them no further trouble to hope for.

They asked the bartender if he knew Jake Tipple. He pointed to four men at a table against the wall. "That's him with the bald head and the leather jacket."

They went over and said, "We're detectives. We'd like some information about Ed Harinson. You want to talk here or somewhere private?"

"What's Ed done?" Jake asked, making space for them at the table.

"He found a couple of burglars dead on the school grounds," Furr said. "I understand you and he were in here drinking last Tuesday night."

"I'm in here drinking most nights. Tuesday is Ed's night off. He and the Baryla boys were in last Tuesday."

"Who did most of the talking?"

"We all talked a lot. We always do."

"Did the Barylas ask Ed a lot of questions?"

Jake's eyes lit up and he leaned forward. His three companions kept quiet, trying to make the others forget their presence. "Was it the Barylas killed?" Jake asked.

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"Yes."

"That's too bad. So young, too. Well, it's an ill wind that blows nobody good. Pete Melion won't weep. He's a nice boy. Yes, they were questioning Ed, now that you bring it up. They asked him a lot about the school."

"And what television programs he watches?"

"Yes. How'd you know that? Come to think of it, they asked him a whole lot of questions."

"How long have you been here tonight?"

"I came in right after supper, about a quarter to seven, been here ever since, and plan to stay until midnight. Hope the old woman has the baby to sleep by then. She usually does."

A sputter of laughter came from Jake's three friends, the first sound they had made since the detectives sat down. Furr looked at them. "You been here, too?"

They shifted about uncomfortably.

"I came in with Jake."

"Ben and I have been here a couple of hours."

The third merely nodded. Furr turned back to Jake. "How well did you know the Barylas?"

"Not very well. They've been coming in for a drink from time to time for the past three years. We all knew them but I never saw them outside."

Furr looked at the three companions, who nodded their heads and made affirmative noises.

"Who is this Pete Melion?"

"He's a nice boy. He and Sheba come in sometimes for a drink . . . the Barylas' neighbor. They're friendly with her."

"Who did the Baryla boys work for?"

Jake didn't know. Ben spoke for the first time, saying, "Some man named Taddy. He called a couple of times. The first time I wrote the name down beside the phone. It was a strange name. He didn't give a number but they knew it and called him back."

"Can you show me where you wrote it?"

Ben got up and led him to an alcove. The pay telephone stuck out from the wall like weeds growing through a crack in cement. Ben scanned the wall and found the name. He read it slowly to Furr: "Tadeusz."

Furr thanked him and signalled Tim Respil. They were conscious of a general breathing of relief when they headed out the

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door. "Did the silent duo say anything when Ben and I left the table?" Furr asked.

Tim shook his head. "I'm afraid we sobered them up; Jake, too, and I think that was a real accomplishment."

They got in their car and Furr opened a plastic bag containing things that had been in Jerzy's pockets. He found a driver's license and showed it to Tim. "Know where that address is?" he asked.

"Somewhere in Roxborough. Couldn't be too far. According to Harinson, they walked to the bar."

Furr called headquarters and got the location. "About six blocks over toward Manayunk," he said. "Let's go."

He put the wallet back and took out a set of keys. Tim turned the car around and headed west.

The Baryla house was a red brick row home in the middle of the block. It was the only house on the street that was dark. There was a space in front of the house marked off by two trash cans placed far enough apart to reserve a place for a pickup truck.

Furr got out, moved the trash cans, and Tim parked their car. They entered the dark house and Furr pressed a light switch. A bare overhead bulb lit up the room.

It was sparingly furnished. A sofa and three chairs that might have been picked up at a garage sale faced a twenty-seven inch stereo television set. There was no rug on the floor, no pictures on the wall.

There was the smell of stale beer everywhere. Furr thought of how different the atmosphere in this house was from that in the bar. Of all the differences, the strongest was not the garish, open bulb in one and the dim lights in the other, not the presence of fellow human beings in one and the emptiness of the other, it was the contrast between the smell of fresh beer and the stench of stale beer.

They walked through a room featuring a Formica top table and plastic chairs, with a mahogany bar in one corner and a green iron safe in the other. The safe was incongruously draped with a red and white checkered table cloth. Furr walked over to it and pressed the handle briefly. The door swung noiselessly open. There was a ledger and a stack of brown envelopes inside but no money and no valuables. Furr nudged the door shut.

The kitchen held an assortment of chipped china, jelly glasses, four beer steins, a blackened frying pan, a refrigerator stocked with frozen food, a gas stove with grill, and an eye-level oven. A large

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bucket that had once held roofing cement served as a waste basket. It was half full of beer cans.

Tim looked around and laughed. Furr shook his head and said, "Robinson Crusoe would feel right at home here."

The second floor matched the first except that it seemed neater. Furr used a handkerchief to pull open several drawers and open the closets. Tim asked, "Should I call the fingerprint team?"

"I think so," Furr replied. "Half the downstairs cabinet doors were open an inch or two; none of the drawers were pushed in all the way. But here every drawer, every door is closed. It looks as if someone went through the second floor and left it neater than he found it."

Furr bent down and looked under the bed. There were beer cans at the foot of the bed but a clutter of shoes, dirty socks, and a large pair of gum boots at the head. He pawed through the litter and said, "Here's something he missed."

He pulled out a square fireproof metal box. "That flat key on the ring made me think there might be something like this around," he said. He put the heavy box on the bed, unlocked it with the flat key, and opened it. There were jewels, a box of old coins, a complete set of antique silver flatware, and several dozen gold chains.

"I think we want to talk with that man Tadeusz that the Barylas worked for," he said. It was seventeen hours before they located him.

The next day Furr started by questioning Pete and Sheba Melion. Pete was a large Slavic blond with a shy smile which did not show his teeth. Sheba was smaller, a vivacious young woman who couldn't look at a man without flirting. She did most of the talking for both of them.

Standing together, they looked like a college fullback and the team's favorite cheer leader. Her clothes had been bought for their shock value and probably cost plenty. She wore them as the manufacturer intended them to be worn and the effect would have been stimulating in Hollywood but was out of place in a row home in Roxborough.

She assured them that Pete had been at the hospital, where he worked as an attendant until midnight the night before. And she had been home alone until he returned. Furr would have felt more like believing it if Pete had said so instead of silently agreeing with her statements. They did get the names of those at the hospital who

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might be able to verify Pete's presence at different times from four until midnight. Furr thanked them.

Tim Respil, who had been writing down their answers and studying the Melions closely, practically exploded when they got back in the car. "Wow! did you get a load of that?"

"How could I miss it?"

"She ought to wear a bra."

"She was wearing a bra, a very expensive one designed to show off what it showed off."

"Too bad," Tim added, sounding as if he didn't really think it was too bad at all. "He seems like such a nice guy, too."

"That's what Ed Harinson was saying."

The parents of the dead burglars lived in another part of town. They were surrounded by a house full of condoling and sympathizing relations and neighbors. They claimed to know nothing of what their sons had done for the past five years. They had watched television until eleven the night before. They did admit that their sons had been employed by "a wicked old man, Tadeusz Wasilewski, who taught the boys to steal."

Once they got the last name, they found Taddy's store easily. Furr gave Tim the job of watching the store while he interviewed hospital personnel and met with Krogen, the Assistant District Attorney who was prosecuting the case.

His questions to doctors and nurses produced more information about Pete Melion's character than about his movements during the time of the murder.

"Pete Melion is a nice boy," Dr. Gomara said, "possibly too nice for his own good, but I wish we had a dozen like him around here. I needed someone to help me with a very uncooperative old woman last night and I saw him in the staff room just starting a cup of coffee and some fig newtons. I asked him where the other nurses were and he left his snack and volunteered. We worked with her for more than half an hour."

"Can you give me the times?"

"It was almost exactly seven-thirty when we started and it took us more than half an hour."

"A little past eight?"

"Past eight at any rate. I couldn't say how much."

"Did you see him again?"

"No. I went to another floor."

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According to Pete Melion, he had shared the nurses' station with Agnes Hoop until ten o'clock. Mrs. Hoop, however, was on leave and could not be located. From ten until midnight the floor had been busy and a nurse and three attendants testified to Pete Melion's presence.

One burly attendant was especially vocal. "It's a damn good thing Pete was on duty. We had to rush a three hundred and fifty pound man to the operating room. Pete and me handled him all right. Pete's strong. Nobody but Pete and me could have done it."

"And I suppose he's a nice boy," Furr added, hoping to make it unanimous.

"He's not a boy. He's a real man, one of the best."

The rest was so much chaff. Everyone told him that Pete could not have killed anyone. He wasn't the type. At one point Furr was driven to explain, "I'm not asking if it was psychologically impossible for Pete to do the killing; I'm asking if it was physically impossible." Apparently only Agnes Hoop could answer that and she was not available.

Furr checked with Tim Respil. There was nothing to report on Taddy. He went to his meeting with Krogen.

"It's clear what happened," Furr told the Assistant District Attorney. "Harinson and his wife sat down to watch the Phillies game at eight o'clock. One or the other of them left the TV from time to time but neither went out of the house. The game lasted past ten o'clock. When it was over, Harinson went out to look things over.

"He saw the pickup truck parked in front of the Administration Building. He ran over and found the front door half open. He looked through the offices, then went upstairs. There he found the Barylas dead and he ran to tell his wife and call the police.

"From what Jake tells us, the Barylas must have pumped Harinson for all he knew about the bell. They decided it was worth stealing. They learned that no one would be around that weekend except the Harinsons and that they never missed a Phillies game.

"It was an easy job. With the grounds all but deserted, the Barylas had only to keep from disturbing Ed and his wife and they could loot the place. So they broke in, stole the bell, and were carrying it out to the truck.

"Then someone shot Jerzy in the back of the head with Eugene's gun and shot Eugene through the heart. Both shots were fired from

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fairly close range. Jerzy's hair was singed and there were powder burns on Eugene's shirt.

"Then the murderer simply left. He didn't take anything."

"Shot with Eugene's gun?"

"It's registered to him. There's a box of cartridges for it in his room."

"You don't think the night watchman shot them?"

"There's no reason why he should deny it if he caught them breaking and entering. Besides that, he would probably have used his own gun."

"He might have been in it with them. They were friends of his."

"I'm keeping that in mind, but even so he would have used his own gun. No matter how you look at it, the use of Eugene's gun is strange. He wasn't threatening anyone with it. Both of them had their hands full carrying that bell. If Eugene had the gun in his jacket pocket, it would be natural for someone who grabbed it to shoot him first at close range. But Jerzy was shot at close range and was probably shot first since the bell fell on him. Then the person standing behind Jerzy shot Eugene while he still had his hands full with the bell.

"The killer didn't take the wallets. Jerzy had twenty-eight dollars in his and Eugene had a hundred and six."

"What other suspects are there?"

"There are half a dozen drinking companions, the Baryla parents, a neighbor whose wife Sheba was overly friendly with the Barylas behind his back, and the old man for whom they worked. He could have been with them on the job and killed them for unknown reasons.

"Whoever killed them must have been known to them. They knew he was there and they weren't afraid of him."

"That seems to rule out the jealous neighbor."

"It might if they knew he was on to them. But he might have pretended not to know what his wife was up to."

"How about alibis?"

"The drinking companions seem to have been in the bar from eight, when the bell last rang, until we got to the bar and questioned them. The parents were home watching television, as were the Harinsons.

"The neighbor works from four until midnight at the hospital nearby. So far no one can swear that he was there all the time but they seem sure he was. Several nurses and attendants worked with

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him from ten until twelve; he was helping a doctor from seven-thirty until a bit after eight. We're narrowing it down, but he seems in the clear.

"Old man Taddy hasn't surfaced yet. I've got Tim Respil watching his store. So far we don't know where he lives. He seems to be a slippery character."

"Anything else?"

"The medical examiner says eight-thirty is a good guess for the time of death, give or take twenty minutes.

"Someone had been through the Baryla brothers' place. I think he found something in a bedroom chest of drawers. The bottom drawer was full of dirty underwear but there was a gap on the right side. Something had been taken out, a box or a package of some sort. He missed a strongbox full of jewelry, stuff from recent burglaries in Bucks County.

"There was a safe in the dining room, probably stolen for opening at leisure. The lock was broken. There wouldn't have been anything in it and it hadn't been used recently. Inside were some envelopes held together with a rubber band which crumbled when I picked them up."

"Looks like the second-hand dealer is our prime suspect."

"Yes. Taddy and Pete lead the field with Taddy in first place. A lot depends on finding Agnes Hook."

"Don't let anything happen to her."

"I see what you mean. If Pete is lying, he would want her out of the way. If she can back up his story, then the real murderer would want to silence her."

With that worry on his mind, Furr increased his effort to find her, but she and her husband were off on a trip of some sort and no one knew much about it.

He did get a big break. The fingerprint evidence showed that someone other than the Barylas had been all over the house. Two of the person's prints were on Eugene's gun, too.

Furr hurried to check with Tim Respil, still watching Taddy's store. "Have you seen him yet?"

"I saw him drive into the back lot. He walked to the back door. He's about five nine and a half, a hundred and eighty pounds, dressed in a rumpled business suit. He's somewhere in his fifties.

"In other words, he looks like forty percent of the white males in Philadelphia."

"He doesn't have a beer belly."

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"So make it twenty percent. I've a bad feeling about this case. I've got three detectives questioning people in the area around the school, asking who they saw in the neighborhood that night. I keep waiting for them to report that a tall blond guy was seen walking away from the school. If Pete Melion was there, someone saw him, I guarantee it. You couldn't miss him. And they'll be able to identify him positively.

"But you take this Taddy. No one sees a guy like that. They don't notice him. And even if they see him and remember it, they wouldn't be able to identify him. The cards are all stacked in the wrong direction.

"If we had a case against Taddy, the jury would love it. He's sleeze from start to finish. They'd give us all the points we need. The judge would come down hard on him and the DA's office would be our friends for life.

"But with Pete it's the other way around. The jury would feel he had a right to kill them for messing around with his wife. Everyone would look at us with reproach. He'd be convicted of second-degree murder at worst and the judge would go light on him. That would make the DA's office sore and they'd blame us."

Tim listened to him patiently. Then he said, "It's not all that bad yet. Maybe we'll get Taddy to confess."

Furr's reply was scatological.

"Anyway," Tim said, "you don't really think that Pete could have left the hospital a little after eight, killed the Barylas, and got back to work by ten, do you?"

"No, but until I get a witness to say that he was in the hospital from eight until ten, I've got to figure the possibility."

"It could have been Taddy. He's sure to have known they were going there. They wouldn't have been afraid of him. He fits pretty well."

"But all we've got against him is that they worked for him. That isn't enough."

"So you go on worrying that a witness against Pete will turn up."

"Or that we will find Agnes Hook with her throat cut. We've got to crack the case—or get to her before the killer does."

Furr went back to the office to go over the medical examiner's evidence and the fingerprint reports. He had barely gotten started when Tim called him. "Taddy's been joined by two men," he said. "They drove a van up to the back and unloaded seven TVs."

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"Good. I'll tell the chief and get right over. He'll be glad to have the Silo burglary solved so soon. Stay there until we get a half dozen cars around the place."

Apparently there was a delay in getting a search warrant because after Furr rejoined his partner, they had to wait half an hour before the raid began. They followed the police in, expecting no trouble but ready for it.

The front of the store was empty. For about two-thirds of the way there was nothing but appliances and furniture. Then there were two large sliding doors. Shut. Beside them was a narrow stairway going up to a sort of balcony with offices. People were talking in the offices, and shadows fell from time to time on windows placed to give someone in the offices a view of the entire store.

Four officers struggled up the narrow stairs but they had to go single file. On signal the first officer smashed through the door gun in hand and shouted, "Police. . . ."

That was as far as he got. Someone threw a telephone at his gun which went off almost under the nose of the officer behind him. A chair crashed through a window and two men jumped through it and into the store.

Furr shoved a sofa into the way of the men. The first jumped over it and headed for the door. Furr tackled the second as he tried to do the same. They knocked the sofa over and the man tried to batter Furr with an overstuffed cushion. Furr easily got a choke grip on him and that part of the fight was over.

Toward the front of the store Tim Respil was having a different kind of success with the other man. Somehow he had got the man's head inside a refrigerator and he was holding the door against the man's neck. All seemed well downstairs.

Upstairs Tadeusz Wasilewski was pretending innocence and demanding to call his lawyer.

The raid on Taddy's store netted evidence in eighteen burglaries but didn't help Furr tie Taddy into the Baryla murders. His prints didn't match those in the Baryla house or on the gun.

As they left headquarters, Tim said, "That was fun while it lasted. What do we do now?"

"We go back to the bar and hope we get there before Jake and his friends start their evening drinking."

They did. They talked with the bartender and arranged to have steins used by Jake and friends smuggled to them for fingerprinting.

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"I hope he doesn't refill the same one all night," Furr said. "I've already had a long day."

"Don't worry," the bartender replied. "They get fresh mugs every round. Sometimes they wind up with a whole table full, stacked three high. I'll see they don't keep their mugs this time."

But Jake and company proved stubborn. They refused to give up the steins. Furr and his partner watched as the drinkers made a glass circle and then a glass tower in the middle of the table. Midnight came and passed. Still the crystal palace grew.

Shortly before twelve-thirty Pete and Sheba came in. "Get us their glasses, too," Furr said. That proved easy. They drank and left early.

At one o'clock Jake finally said, "I guess the old woman has got the baby to sleep by now. I'm going home." His friends followed him, all of them staggering with practiced uncoordination. Furr got steins of each of them tagged for identification. The bartender began carrying the rest to the dishwasher.

It was after noon the next day when they got the good news. One set of prints matched. The detectives whistled in unison as they read the report. "The prints belong to Sheba!" Furr said.

"And where does that leave us?" Tim asked.

"We'll see. And we'll start with a search warrant."

At two in the afternoon police cars crowded the two lane street in front of the house next to the Barylas'. Pete Melion had not left for the hospital. He answered the door and stood filling it while Furr served him with the warrant. His eyes were troubled and puzzled. He demanded and got several minutes' worth of explanations before he finally stepped aside and let the officers enter.

Sheba, tense as a stalking tiger, stood hard up against him and dug her fingers into his jacket. Furr remained with the couple while the officers searched. It seemed a long time. Finally he heard Officer Cross's heavy tread coming downstairs. There was a wide grin on his face and a gaudy shopping bag dangling tauntingly from his right hand.

Furr looked at Sheba. For the first time there was fear in her eyes. Cross opened the bag and showed Furr the contents, stacks of hundred dollar bills, all stained with purple dye. The bank wrappers were intact, First Pennsylvania Bank. Fifty thousand dollars taken in a robbery two weeks ago, money the robbers had not dared try to spend.

"Where did you find it?"

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"In her bedroom at the back of a shelf in the closet."

Furr approached Sheba. She was no longer tense, no longer charged with energy. She stood limp against her husband, his arm protecting her, his eyes incredulous.

"Mrs. Piotr Melion, I arrest you for the murder of Jerzy and Eugeniusg Baryla. I warn you that anything . . ."

Assistant District Attorney Krogen listened eagerly as Furr tied up the loose ends. His secretary and two clerks simply waited. When he finished, they would begin building their case.

"Sheba Melion has refused to talk. Her husband has hired a team of lawyers. But I don't anticipate any trouble for us.

"As I see it, the Baryla brothers bragged to her about the robbery, even showed her the money and talked about what they would have to do to pass it. She had a key to their house but she didn't know where they kept money and she didn't dare search for it. Even if she got it, they would know she was the one who took it.

"When they told her about the bell, she volunteered to help them. Eugene gave her his gun. She was to be their lookout and guard against any surprises.

"She waited until she could kill both of them quickly. With both of them carrying that heavy bell, they were helpless. She shot them and returned to their house, found the stolen money, and took it. She was prepared to lay low until people forgot about the killing.

"One of her dresses shows traces of gunpowder. That and the fingerprints should wrap it up."

Krogen grinned."Good work," he congratulated the detectives. "In a way it's a shame, though. Her husband seems like such a nice young man."

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ANOTHER GRAVE TONE

by JAMES HOLDING

Here lies a banker, Robert Sloan,
The dignified head of a Savings & Loan—
A so-called "Thrift" (misnomer, surely,
Since its patrons' savings fared so poorly).
For when they deposited hard-earned pelf,
Sloan promptly loaned it to himself.
You see, Sloan dearly loved to bet
On horses, blackjack, and roulette,
On football, hockey, basketball—
In fact, on anything at all.
Compulsive gambler, secret boozer,
He always ended up a loser,
Using the Savings & Loan's assets
To cover his losses and make more bets,
Squand'ring his customers' savings while he
Went on living the life of Reilly.
(You can see why "Thrift" was a word absurd—
"Spendthrift" would be a more fitting word.)

At last a bureaucrat named Franks,
Whose job was regulating banks,
Discovered that Sloan's was a basket case
And that Sloan himself was a real disgrace.
With "conflict of interest" they charged poor Sloan,
Which Sloan denied in an outraged tone
Until he got his case dismissed
With naught but a warning slap on the wrist.
"A slap on the wrist!" his customers cried.
"This guy is a crook! He ought to be fried!
He's stolen our savings, ruined our lives,
Made paupers out of our kids and wives!"
And one depositor, robbed by Sloan,
Determined to fix Sloan on his own.
Eschewing frying, he chose instead
To loan Sloan a bullet in the head.
Sloan now lies here beneath this stone
And the government's stuck with his Savings & Loan.

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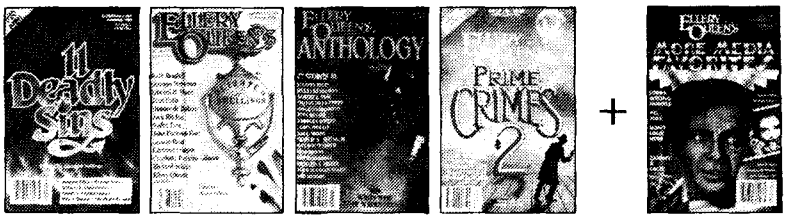

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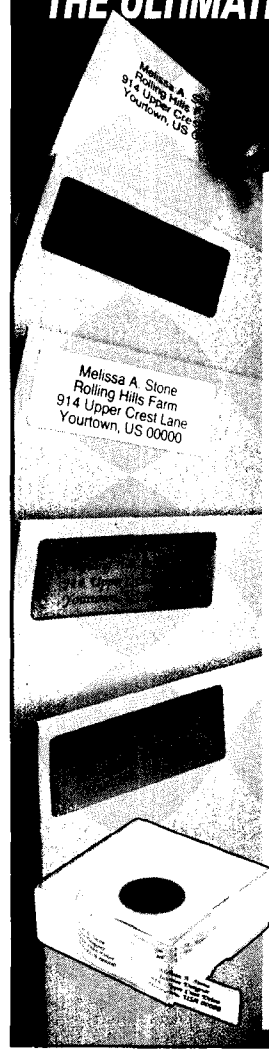

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